

In Infinitum: First Contact

by Victor Weiss

Category: Halo, Mass Effect

Genre: Sci-Fi, Suspense

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-09-19 12:34:32

Updated: 2015-01-23 09:53:41

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:28:33

Rating: T

Chapters: 27

Words: 149,945

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: In the year of 2581 the UNSC stumbles across a discovery hidden beneath their noses and now a new gateway to life outside of the Forerunner space is opened and with it comes all new challenges and rewards. Its time for First Contact. OC centric, some world building as needed and war. Lots and lots of war. Rated T for blood, language, violence and gore.

1. Prologue

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

Author Note****

Alright, my dear readers and people who have followed the other story. I regret to inform you all that I will be deleting it and its chapters up until that point will be banished to the deepest recesses of my stories folder for all eternity. Why? Because I've lost all interest in writing for it. I have reread it, blinked at some of my choices and face palmed. So now, I deem it an eye sore and with my improved skittles, knowledge and the aid of both wikis, games and general know-how, I am going to be redoing In Infinitum and trying to rectify my many mistakes.****

On that note. The first few changes will be that I will be posting this story, a smaller version to kick things off. The stories, assuming I make it that far, will be in three. (Bold promise, I know. Get it? Bold?â€|Anyways!) The first being In Infinitum: First Contact. This will cover how the Haloverse encounters the Citadel races. Not giving any real length on how many chapters this story will be, but it will begin with moments leading up first contact between the UNSC and Turians all the way through until the conflict is ended. ****

_The second will be covering the events of Eden Prime, possibly the Collectors depending how I can fit them into the story line. The third will obviously cover the Reaper War. Now, all of that out of**

the way, here is to the prologue to the first story of the new series by myself. **_

**In Infinitum: First Contact**

_**Update Author Note: I feel I should now add this to the AN at the beginning. As some, rather... many, have pointed out. I do know the Relay is huge from Canon ME information and the Relay should have buried in Charon. But instead, I shoved it inside Pluto. To explain the reasoning behind these changes. I shall do so! First, the Relay size. I imagine it takes a lot of power to send ships from one point to another with the Relay system. And so, it has always bugged me how small the relay seems to be for this duty. Way I see it, they needed to be bigger, so they could contain the power core that sends the ships on a one way "second trip" across vast amounts of galaxy, so, yeah. made em bigger. Now, the reason for shoving the Relay inside Pluto. I did that because if it were a moon, I firmly believe Humanity would have found much earlier in its 200+ years of space faring life since most of the local systems would have mined for whatever materials it could be. So I needed a hiding place for the thing where I knew it would remain hidden... And I just wanted to 2012 Pluto. Righto!

>_

Prologue

**September 21, 2581. Military Calendar.

>UNSC Sensor Station _**Athena**_**, Sol System. 1300 Hours.

>The blackness of space was always so daunting when one was alone in a computer filled room with nothing to look at by the screen filling with various, and unimportant, sensor data or the long slit of a viewing window into the deep black vacuum that was endless space. And for Ensign Henry Connors it was the second most boring posting that the UNSC could ever give someone during peace times, which it was. Almost thirty full years of peace had been good for the UNSC of course, but for the people like him who were once making decent pay for sitting around a station and keeping alert for Covenant? Not so much.

His pay check wasn't as impressive anymore, his hours were still murder and now it was boring. Especially since it was the Sol system, Earth was practically next door and they kept him here on this stupid station? Madness! But, he guessed it could be worse. He was still getting paid to literally sit on his ass and do nothing, it was his own fault he lacked any real entertainment to pass the hours.

He could hardly believe it really, it still seemed like only last week the UNSC and Covenant were at others throats trying to strangle each other. Now? Well, more or less it was still the same. Brutes had retreated into their own systems and as part of a "rehabilitation" project as they called it in the holovids, they were trying to uplift the damn things into something bigger than "Smash that, win this".

Waste of time if the Ensign ever heard one.

Though, he supposed the relations with the Jackals and Elites, or as they were to be called now for political and racial reasons, Kig-yar and Sangheili. The relations between these two and the UNSC was

stable and prospering like a well oiled and maintained machine of economy. The birds had a natural talent for trading and their home system was rich minerals that both the UNSC and Sangheili needed to build a great number of things.

Kig-Yar, bless them birds, were quickly becoming the richest species in the neighbourhood and knew it. Henry remembered when he had been on leave on Earth and he had seen some Kig-Yar high-class citizens. They were pretty blinged up.

_Hah! Bling. Who says that anymore? _He thought himself, snickering.

Of course the times for the UNSC and Sangheili were fairly good. With the goods from the three of them fuelling their economic machines. The Big Three were rebuilding so quickly it almost seemed that they'd be seeing fat Kig-Yar and fifty new colonies within the next decade. But, with any growing lawn there were weeds.

The Covenant Loyalists, a small faction of mixed species who still bought the lies sown by the Prophets of the old Covenant were still a problem in the outer colonies of the Sangheili and Kig-Yar systems. Acting much like the Innies of today, terrorists who focused more on killing and recruiting.

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

Henry was about ready to just daze off for a couple hour nap when his terminal pinged. It _pinged_. A ping meant something out there was happening and it wasn't normal. He sat straight up, almost falling back over in his haste as he hastily moved his fingers over the keys while staring at the screen.

He had received a report from one of the probes. He clicked Enter on the file.

More data scrolled across his primary screen and the Ensign sat up. He blinked slightly, narrowing his eyes as an anomaly was detected by one of the sensor probes orbiting the various planets of the system, particularly Pluto. Apparently the Probe had performed a close sweep of the iceball and discovered a very surprising fact about it. There was Seismic activity on it.

"What?" Henry whispered, leaning closer and rereading.

That had to be a mistake. Pluto wasn't a planet, it was a giant, well, more so, massive ball of ice. No core, no shifting plates. The thing was just the galaxy's, as far as they knew, largest ice ball. So how did it have seismic activity? He stared at the report a moment longer then activated a Tight-Beam transmission to the probe and ordered a visual on the main viewing screen.

A moment later the connection came online and the ice ball appeared on the screen. It looked normal, but seismic activity couldn't be seen from orbit. He wished the probe had deep thermal scanners or better observational equipment. He couldn't get much more from this.

He cut the connection, flagged the report and Tight-Beamed it to UNSC CentCom Station Atlas in orbit over Earth. Along with the following recommendation. "Seismic activity detected on Pluto. Probe checks

out, no errors. Recommend closer inspection." The message sent and he sat back in his chair.

Just what the hell?

****September 21, 2581. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC _**Exploration**_-Class Frigate **_**Eye of the Beholder**_**, Sol System. 2100 Hours.

>Commander Nathan Massey sat back in his Captain's chair with a stern expression on his aging face as he and his small inspection group sped towards the ice ball that was Pluto. At forty-seven he already looked twenty years older, but anyone who gazed into his dark eyes would know that despite the old look he moved like a man three decades younger. Despite being a Navy Commander, he had once been a full blood Captain before a mistake during one of his shore leaves had resulted in him being kicked down to Commander and assigned to a out-of-the-way job as Captain of a ship designed to scope things out inside the Sol System.

Which was another way of saying that the UNSC didn't want him causing him more trouble. Not that he cared, he was still commanding a ship. Albeit an _Exploration _Class ship, but still a ship.

"Slow to cruise!" He ordered, voice full of authority.

"Aye, Commander." his Navigations officer replied. The _Eye of the Beholder _slowed as they neared the ice giant. "Destination reached, sir." Navigations reported.

"Good work," Nathan said, observing the iceball. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, then again. He wasn't the scientist. "Connect me to Doctor Asuka." He said, looking up at his central view station.

"Aye sir!"

The screen flickered, then the view of a pretty young redhead appeared on the screen. Her sharp green eyes stared at him as she adjusted her lab coat. "_Yes, Commander_" she asked, tone polite.

"Ma'am, we've arrived. Get your people prepped to go to ground, We'll be in orbit here waiting to pick you all up once you've gotten your investigation out of the way." Nathan replied just as politely. It was no secret that Navy personnel and civilians didn't get along, especially when he was the babysitter and cab for say civvie and she some up and coming "star" in the science community.

It was a major headache waiting to happen. Nathan could just feel it.

"_Thank you, Commander._" Doctor Asuka replied, gesturing to someone offscreen before looking back at him. "_Will we have a security detail_"

Nathan considered, then nodded. "A squad of marines should do. Nothing out of ordinary detected on the sensors. it's the Sol system, Doctor. We're secure." he waved a dismissive hand.

"_True_, " she agreed with a small nod. "_But, the cautious are the most rewarded_" she grabbed a tablet, typed in something on it and

said. "_My team and I will be ready and off in ten minutes. Good day, Commander_."

"Doctor." Nathan nodded. The screen closed, he sighed. "Damn civvies."

****UNSC **_**Eye of the Beholder**_**, Hanger bay.**

>Gunnery Sergeant William Buck wondered who he had managed to piss off to be put posted on a _Exploration_ Class Frigate when he should be on a more distant ship out in the outer colonies trying to get the last few pockets of the Insurrectionists cleaned out so that thorn in their side could stop digging deeper. But, that was not to be it seemed because he had been assigned to the Eye of the Beholder and now he was going to be leading the security detail for the eggheads being sent down to the iceball that was Pluto to scope out a possible seismic anomaly.

William didn't claim to be an expert on planet sized ice cubes, but when a coreless, plateless ball of ice suddenly started getting earthquakes, then maybe it was worth checking out if not for the science sakes. Least that was probably the reasoning that the UNSC was thinking since they sent only one ship to check it out.

He slapped on his helmet and checked his MA5D, he slid a magazine of Armor Piercing rounds and the ammo-counter flashed to a full and sweet 32. He racked the bolt and checked the other seven members of the security detail as they too loaded their MA5D and M6C sidearms. They were going down light, since no contact was expected and the security detail was more or less just a gesture of good will rather than a real necessity.

His helmet com crackled to life and the Commander's voice spoke into his ear. "_Sergeant. Your team ready_?"

William glanced at his team, they looked ready. "Yes sir, we're ready to get boots on ice. What about our team of eggheads?" he replied.

"_They'll be down shortly. Don't let them slip and sprain an ankle_."

William had to smile at that remark. "No promises sir." he said. And with that, the doors to the hanger opened and in marched a dozen people in airtight suits, holding various cases probably full of gear and reading equipment for whatever it is they were going to do down there. The leader of the group was the redheaded doctor he knew as Valerie Asuka.

She approached his team of marines, who were all suited up for vacuum in combat suits. "You ready?" she asked him.

"Five minutes ready now, ma'am." William replied with a nod. She nodded, told them to hop onto Pelican Two while she and her team rode down on Pelican One. "Yes, Ma'am." He rolled his eyes, civviesâ€ you give them a job and they suddenly think they run the show. He turned to his team. "Piles into Pelican Two, double time!"

"Sir!" they chorused and rushed over into the hold of the second Pelican, which spun their engines up to prepare for lift off.

His team took their seats. He by the door, his second in command, a Sergeant Carl Holden. Bright young kid, only twenty-one and a sergeant, bright future in the Navy for kids like him. Bit brash through. A moment later, the Pelican shuddered as they were released into vacuum and then began to descend down groundside.

The ride was quiet and lasted only five minutes before they felt the tug of gravity, Pluto, while not a planet, had the mass for its gravitational field. The Pelican shuddered again, the pilots voice came over the com. "_Alright, touchdown. Please watch that first step, gets icy out there_" there was a grin in the words.

The Gunny wondered how many Ice puns they're have to suffer during this trip. The ramp lowered. "Go! Go! Go!" He ordered his team. They shouldered their rifles and in two file lines stepped off the Pelican onto the ice laden ground, the temperature dropped could be felt through their suits and their internal systems increased the temperature to compensate. Their weapons swept the darkness, beside them, the second Pelican was also open and the science team stepped out, their helmets lighting with their own flashlights.

He opened a com to the doctor. "Ma'am, have your team stick close to ours." He turned to said team, "Ramirez, Vasquez. You two get to watch our asses." The pair nodded. "Tanner, you and Holden get the right side of the eggheads. Vickers and Boralis, you get left." The four accepted the orders, that left himself and York taking point. They moved over to the science team and together the twenty individuals moved across the darkened surface away from the Pelicans.

The small hike lasted four miles before finally, Asuka said to him. "This will do, Sergeant."

"Yes, ma'am." He replied, giving the hold signal with a fist. He scanned the area, they had descended into a large crater, the slope hadn't been steep, more like a slightly descent and now, they were at the bottom of it.

"Holden," William said. "Take Vickers and Vasquez and set up a perimeter around the camp."

"Sir!" Holden saluted, gestured to the other two and made off with them.

"Rest of you, help the eggheads set their gear up. Soon they get done, sooner we get back to the _Eye_." The Gunny said.

"Sir!"

And so, the Science team with the aid of the marines set their camp up in roughly ten minutes. Their air supply would last them five hours, four was their window. And as they finished setting up the last of the equipment, William would have wiped the sweat from his brow, but he was wearing a helmet and he didn't want to freeze to death, or choke, whichever came first here.

He stood on guard, MA5D held loosely in a relaxed position with its barrel to the ground. Flood lights had been set up to help visibility. The Pelicans were on standby, and up above? He could barely make out the _Eye of the Beholder_ in orbit, he smiled up at

the ship and did a small wave.

One of the scientists suddenly called out. "Doctor! Come here!" William turned to the commotion and saw Doctor Asuka rushing over to her colleague and looking intently at the screen of his terminal. She stepped back, looking surprised, which for the normally stoic doctor was more amazed. William walked over.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She looked at him. "Its feint, butâ€¦ there's a heat build-up in the ice." She replied, tone thoughtful. Her eyes were focused on some distant goal now, likely thinking over what that would mean. A heat build up? On a coreless ball of ice? Impossible.

William wasn't sure what this all meant, but it showed there was more to Pluto than met the eye. "What does that mean?"

"It means something is heating the ice up." Asuka turned to her colleague. "How deep did the scans detect the heat increase?" she asked now.

"Ten kilometres, maximum depth range." He paused, then said. "We'd need drilling equipment shipped down to get a deeper reading."

She nodded, considering the option. The Gunny stepped forward, "Ma'am, remember our window. To get a drilling set up down here would take most, if not all, of our four hour window." he informed her. "I suggest we get what we can now, then make a second trip."

"Noted." She dismissed him, still looking thoughtful.

That irked him, but he held his tongue. She was in charge, he offered his advice and his job was to ensure security, not fret over her decisions. He turned to his team, then his com crackled and it was Holden who spoke. "_Sir, perimeter swept, nothing. Its dead out here_." a pause. "_Making our way back now_."

"Right, good work." William replied. He moved away from the eggheads and opted to back to his original post. Then, there was a slightly tremor beneath his boots, making him blink and glance downwards, it was slightly, but he felt it. He looked to the others. "Anyone else feel that?" he asked.

Asuka looked at him, frowning. "Yes, Sergeant. I felt it too." the various scientists gave their assent that they felt it. "Johnson, get me a reading, what cause that?!" she called over to another of her team. The man hastily typed, then, he shrugged. He didn't know. "Then find out." she said.

He snapped to it.

William raised his foot, then stomped it once. He paused, then the tremor returned and this time it was more defined, some of the equipment clattered, he raised his weapon on instinct to the unknown situation. "What the hell?" he muttered.

"Find me a reason for this, Johnson." Asuka ordered,

"Working on it, Doctor!"

The tremor happened again, this time it lasted longer, two seconds the ice beneath their feet rumbled and in the distance a soft "snap" echoed out. The marines turned and raised their weapons, expecting something. William included. He frowned.

"Doctor!" the first scientist called. "The heat build up, its increasing rapidly!" He reported. Asuka rushed over to his side again, ordering him to show her the data. He did so, "See? Its climbing!"

William frowned deeper. "Alright, I'm calling the Pelicans, Pack up your gear. We're dusting off as soon as Holden, Vasquez and Vickers returns." he said, raising a hand to his com. "Pelican Two and One, do you-"

The tremor turned into a ground terrible shudder, the ice beneath his feet groaned and in the distance, another loud snap was heard, it carried on for a mile. The ice shifted again and when he looked down the ice creaked, then with a hiss became littered in fractures. He stayed still, as if the tiniest step would shatter the very ground beneath him.

"Temperature spike! Its rising again!" The man stood, "Doctor, we have to go! The temperature rising as this rate could very well flash vaporize the center of Pluto!"

That seemed to make Asuka pause, then nod, "Save what equipment you can!" She ordered, turning to William. "Sergeant, tell your men to hurry, we have to go!"

"Ma'am!" William com'd his second in Command again. "Holden, double time, it now!" he barked.

"_Sir, on it sir! We're getting some weird tremors out here_!"

"I know! That's why you double time your ass here_, Now_!" The Gunny turned and ordered his men to help the eggheads gather their gear for the Pelicans. He looked at the ground, and then five meters to right, the ground groaned loudly, then with a loud snap the ice split open with enough force that resulting tremor shook the team onto their asses, the "crack" grew, spread and the surrounding ice fragmented, falling into the growing chasm. And then, steam shot up into the air.

The ground around them grew unstable as large cracks formed around them. William stood, turned to them. "Go! Run!" he grabbed his rifle, then said. "Now!" forgetting the gear entirely, the marines and scientists broke into runs away from the chasm that continued to spread. They ran for all they were worth. He risked a glance over his shoulder.

The chasm was now easily over a mile long and growing wider as steam continued to hiss out like an angry huff of air. The ice around it cracked and fell down into the chasm and then larger fragments, the ground began to collapse into the steam filled maw. He turned back ahead and spotted the other three he sent out. They ran alongside him. The group of twenty moved, but the eggheads were getting tired.

"Pelican one and two! We need immediate pick-up! Right now, activating our transponders!" William shouted into the com.

"_Roger, moving now. Be there in two minutes_."

"You got one!" The Gunnery Sergeant growled. And then, as if fate decided it didn't like them. Ahead by twenty five meters. Another crack hissed steam and expanded with explosive force, they stumbled, but didn't lose their footing this time—but they were cut off now. He grit his teeth as the piece of ice they were on began to subtly sink downwards.

The scientists began to panic, the marines? They held their tongues, looking to the air for the birds and silently praying. The Gunnery Sergeant looked around, a tremor tore ground again and to their left, the ice split open. They moved away from it as quickly as they could. "Come on—come on." William whispered.

"_Ground team, this is Pelican one. I see you, coming in now_!" to the east, two spotlights shined down on them. The two Pelicans descended downwards, their engines roar drowned out by the massive geysers of the steam around them. The first Pelican hovered down, opening its ramp. The scientists piled into it, the second hovered as well, its ramp lowered.

"Onto the bird, Marines! We're dusting off!" William shouted.

His marines stepped onto the second Pelican, then, the ground split again with another powerful hiss of steam—two feet behind him, the force of the blast was enough to send the pelican jerked up and forward, klaxons blared, the second lifted off hastily, knocking Doctor Asuka off the ramp and onto the ice, which began to tilt upwards, slanting the surface of the large fractured ice.

She screamed into the com she hit the ice and began to slide down, finding no holds to catch. William turned, seeing her, he grit his teeth. "Shit!" he dropped his MA5D and stepped back. "I'm going for her!"

"_What?!_" The pilot gasped.

William got a running start, and he leapt. He saw the ice coming, he hit it with a pained groan and began to slide downwards after her on his belly, turning around so he was facing down he slid like an armored penguin after her. "Doctor, try to slow your fall! kick the ice with your boot heels, try to dig in!" he spoke through the com.

"I'm trying!" she replied, obviously frightened, her arms flailed slightly, the gap into the chasm was fast approaching. He grit his teeth and used his hands to increase his speed. Soon, he was gaining.

Fifty seven meters and they'd be lost. He grit his teeth, she was a meter away, they were forty meters to death. She grew closer, then, he took her hand. "Hang on!" He shouted, rolling onto his back he drew his combat knife and with a jerk rammed it into the ice with a vice grip. The blade jerked, his shoulder popped and he cried out as the knife slid across the ice, leaving a shallow scar, slowing them, Thirty meters. "Pelican two, where the hell are you?!" he shouted

into the com.

"_Right here_" the Pelican descend edbeside them, overtaking them and the lowered ramp went down, scraping against the ice in front of them. William let the knife go and they slid onto the ramp, the marines pulled them inside and it closed. The Pelican lifted up and away from the surface.

Doctor Asuka panted, her chest rising and falling so rapidly he stared a moment, then his shoulder lanced with pain and he grit his teeth. "Shit!" he held it and looked to the others. They were all there. "What the hell was that?" he asked no one in particular.

No one replied to him. Each strapping themselves in for the ride back to _Eye of the Beholder_. When they reached the Frigate, the Pelicans landed and the ramps lowered, the teams climbed out onto the hanger deck.

William stood, looking to Asuka. He offered her a hand, "Doctor." he said. She looked up at him, eyes still wild with adrenaline and fear, she nodded, took his hand and he lifted her up to her feet. They got off the Pelican, looking around as crews checked the damages to the birds, which looked fine.

"_Doctor Asuka to the bridge. Commander's orders_" The coms Officer's voice came over to the intercom system.

"Shall I escort you, doctor?" William asked, looking at her. She nodded, and they made their way to the bridge as quickly as they could walk. They reached the lift, walked down two halls and finally they reached the doors to the bridge. They paused at the doors when William realised something.

They were still holding hands.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said, untangling his hand from hers. She took hers back as well, their faces colored slightly. His tan complexion to her paler one. Blushing, they entered the bridge and William snapped off a salute to the Commander. "Commander, sir!"

The Commander didn't address him, instead just stared ahead at the viewing monitors. William and Asuka followed his gaze. Their eyes widened.

Pluto was on the screen. Across its surface chasms appeared and spread, fracturing entire large island sized chunk of ice across its surface as large geysers of steam filled the air around it, the piece broke up, swallowed by connected chasms soon after.

Before their eyes. Pluto broke apart.

****End of Prologue****

****Well, there it is. The prologue to the new In Infinitum. Now, be so kind as to leave some feedback in the form of a review and/or follow/fav! Questions? PM me or ask in a review and I shall answer. Same with suggestions. Now, I will not be posting any new chapters for awhile, i'm currently typing a few of them before I start posting them on a hopefully weekly basis so I don't suffer a lack of ideas or pressure. That said, thanks for reading.**

>

2. Chapter one

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

Author Note:** I was saving this chapter until a week had passed, but with the hit of 30 Reviews in less than said week I believe those who wanted to see this continue have earned the next chapter. So, here it is! Enjoy! Least I hope you do.**
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PS.** 2012'd Pluto. Felt great.**
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****Chapter One****

****September 23, 2581. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC **_**Marathon**_**-Class Cruiser **_**Hail Mary**_****, Sol System. 2000 Hours.

>Within the two days of the anomaly and subsequent shattering of the ice giant known as Pluto. The UNSC had pulled its pants up and suited up for a possible conflict when the largest pieces of ice broke off and drifted off into the void, they had fired missiles, breaking them up further to reduce the risk of them hitting anything should they cross a planets path. Remote chances that one, but better safe than sorry. And after the larger pieces drifted the UNSC had sent in frigates and to tow and move the other pieces out of the way.

Why move them? Well, because something was putting off massive energy readings in the middle of that frozen debris field. It had been detected a day ago by the **_Eye of the Beholder _**which had been on station at the time with an investigation team to try and find out what the seismic anomaly had been. The resulting chaos that ensued no one could have predicted.

Pluto broke itself apart and now they were clearing the debris to see what exactly was hidden below the ice.

That was why the newly formed Battlegroup Mojave had been called out and assigned to oversee the clearing operation. Comprised of one **_Marathon_-Class** cruiser, a Heavy Destroyer, three Destroyers, A Supercarrier and five Frigates. In war time this would be considered a small force, but for peace times it was almost excessively large since the UNSC was still spread thin across its territory.

With barely a hundred fifty intact ships left in the wake of the Human/Covenant war, along with the fifty off damaged ones and the UNSC's severely decreased shipping yards. It was amazing the UNSC had the seven thousand, three hundred and sixty or so ships they did already. They could have had more of course, but with the war over military production was put on the backburner in favor of re-colonization and terraforming of the old glassed worlds.

Spread that fleet out across a good hundred or so colonies and territory, suddenly that number was more insignificant then Rear Admiral Richard was willing to admit to himself or his crew. At seventy he had been around during the war and had seen planets glassed and billions dead, still, when the peace fell on them and the offer for retirement came forward to the Rear Admiral a year ago, he

kindly declined and told them.

"I want to Captain my ship when I don't have to worry about extinction."

They had accepted that, handed him a medal and the _Hail Mary _for his service. Now he was head of Battlegroup Mojave. He watched the frigates tug more ice chunks away from the energy center until finally they got a visual. "Bout' damn time." He muttered, seeing a glint of blue in the field. "Helm. Get me a visual."

"Aye, Admiral."

The main screen flickered on and then, a soft blue hue in the center of the debris field. "Three times zoom." He said.

"Aye, sir."

The camera zoomed in to three times, and blue hue was more defined, and through the spots of debris he could see something. It was large, very large. "More Forerunner tech?" he muttered. It wouldn't surprise him to think that the Forerunners had buried something beneath ice and just let it all gather for years. But, somehow, he didn't think this was the case. _So, what could it be? He thought to himself, entwining his fingers.

Ever since the Didact attack on Earth, the shield world Requiem had provided many Forerunner technological assets. Including the location of various other Forerunner temples and caches. With that, Humanity had jumped from the least technological advanced species to head of the top three species.

Kig-Yar came in second and the Sangheili Empire in third. Not a bad way to go about things, he supposed. He still felt bitter towards his former foes, but he wasn't one of those "anti-alien" extremists in the colonies and Earth who preached how Humanity should flip the bird at their allies. No, Richard wasn't stupid. He understood that together the three of the species had done more in the last thirty years than they could have done in a century alone.

Medical and military advances, it was a golden age. Sides the Covenant Loyalists and Innies prowling the border systems, but they could be excused. The Galaxy was in great shape for the moment.

And now this? Whatever it was, it would either be a blessing or another curse to set upon them when they thought they were safe again from the nightmares of the galaxy.

Two more debris chunks were moved, and there was a more clear view of the object. Richard leaned forward in his chair and stared at it hard. It was large, now he could see how large it was. It was easily twice as big as two _Infinity_-Class cruisers, and three as long. It was like two massive prongs that joined at the rearâ€¦ or was it the front? And in the center was a glowing blue core that pulsed with energy. Which explained the readings they were picking up.

"Whoa," his Navigations Officer whispered. "That is one bigâ€¦ thingy."

"That's what she said," snickered his Operations Officer, stifling a

chuckle with his hand.

"Cut the chatter," Richard cut in sharply as he leaned back into his Captain's chair. "Well, it's not shooting death rays, plasma or slugs. So, I'm going to say its automatically hostile." He said without joking. "Connect me to the _Eye of the Beholder_."

"Right away, Admiral." Coms replied. And in moments, he was staring at the face of Commander Massey.

"_Yes, Admiral_?" The Commander said, saluting briefly.

"You seeing this, Commander?" Richard asked as he stared back at the Commander.

"_Aye sir, I'm looking at it. Eggheads are chattering like school children about it_." Massey replied, sounding a bit annoyed. "_Want me to connect you to lead egghead_?"

"Please do." Richard nodded.

The screen changed and the lovely young face of Doctor Valerie Asuka appeared on his screen. Her eyes were darting over a tablet she held and behind her various other lab goers moved about, obviously working overtime on whatever the thing they were seeing was.

"_Yes, Admiral, what can I do for you_?" she asked without looking at him.

"Doctor. Anything you can tell me about whatever this is?" Richard was bit irked she didn't look at him, but he could let it slide. Her personality was one he was familiar with, she was smart and knew it and expected many things for herself. She was a regular Catherine Halsey in the making if he could guess her future.

She looked at him this time, taking a breath she spoke. "_Well, for oneâ€¦ its energy readings are off the charts. Its putting out more energy in that core than seven _Infinity_-Class cruisers could produce_." she said, rather awed, but her expression didn't shift. "_Second, while the core is putting out massive amounts of energy, it appearsâ€¦ dormant, somehow. There was three rings at it center around the core, they don't appear connected to the super structure itself, soâ€¦ we can assume they should be doing something_."

Richard nodded with her assessment, he liked she worked fast, then again they likely had probes in the field now doing closer recon and getting more accurate data. "Anything else, Doctor?"

"_Well, its too early to tell, butâ€¦ initial reports suggest its _not_ Forerunner_." She said, as if it were taboo.

He raised a brow. "Repeat that, Doctor?"

"_It's likely not Forerunner, in factâ€¦ I'm willing to bet my degree it isn't_." She replied, more firmly now, and just a tick more annoyed with him for having to repeat herself. "_Its design and shape don't match other known Forerunner structures, also the core is producing energy that we aren't familiar with. This could be very well the sign of another advanced species we haven't met

yet_."

"Well," Richard frowned placed his hands on the arm rests of his command chair. "That's just lovely. So, what are we dealing with? Forerunner's grandparents?" he growled. The idea of another advanced alien race, if they were still around, wasn't something he liked to think about considering first contact for Humanity generally was a bad thing.

First contact with the Covenant? Glassed worlds. First contact with Forerunner? Digital ghosting. First Contact Flood? Possible galaxy wide biohazard.

"What's next? A race of sentient machines bent on Organic destruction? We haven't been attacked by giant robots yet." Richard muttered to himself, then looked back to the doctor. "Well, if those rings you spoke about are supposed to be doing something, what would they be doing?" he asked now.

"_I wouldn't know, there is still too little data. We'll need a few hours to collect more readings from the object,_" she said. "_With your permission, I'd like to take a Pelican to inspect the object at closer range when the debris field is further cleared, Admiral_."

Richard considered her request. He could allow it, but the risks involved here made him hesitant to grant that particular request, what if the thing activated and acted like a localized Halo ring? Or perhaps was some sort of ancient bomb, if it was producing the amount of power that Asuka told him it was, the battlegroup would be engulfed by an explosion akin to a dozen or so NOVA bombs. Not something Richard wanted to experience first hand. Still, they needed to know more about this thing.

"_Admiral_?"

"Permission granted," Richard said simply. "Just be careful."

"_Of course, Admiral_." the screen winked out.

The Rear Admiral stood, groaning softly and muttering "my back" as he moved to exit the bridge, "Wake me in six hours. Lieutenant Valentine, you have the bridge." he patted his Lieutenant on the shoulder once as he passed her, she saluted and he left the bridge to head back to his cabin. It would be another few hours before the debris field would be cleared enough for them to get more clear pictures and reading from the damn thing, so for now, he'd rest.

* * *

><p>September 23, 2581. Military Calendar.
UNSC
Exploration****-Class Frigate **_**Eye of the Beholder**_**,
Sol System. 0100 Hours.

>It had taken the better part of five hours but the it appeared that debris field was no cleared enough that the eggheads could take a Pelican and go get a closer look at what had caused Pluto to break itself apart while they were still on it. Honestly? William almost considered asking the eggheads what was wrong with just leaving it there to collect space dust. But, it wasn't his place to question the brains while he was the brawn.

And Doctor Asuka had personally requested accompany them on the Pelican while they were off checking out the object at closer range in the bird. At first, William had been planning to decline, but there was something in the doctors eyes when she spoke to him, she had a slight tinge of fear in them and he understood why she wanted him along. He had saved her and so he was, for the moment, a security blanket.

Hopefully we'll be under the blankets soon enough, William thought slyly, he wasn't a shallow man but out in the cold depths of space you took pleasure where you found it. And Doctor Asuka was very easy on the eyes so if things took a turn for the better between them, then hoorah.

He proceeded down towards the hanger bay where they would be waiting. This time around it was just him as the lone marine and four eggheads as the science team. Hopefully this time had less danger and more eggheads doing something useful.

He didn't hold onto that hope long.

A pair of doors opened and he stepped into the hanger, the Pelican looked prepped and ready to go. He looked over the area and saw Asuka and her team were just getting their final preparations done as well. She saw him, nodded and gestured him over as she moved away from the group. He raised a brow, then followed after her.

Once they were away, he stood before her. "Yeah, doc?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. He was wearing basic marine garb, no airtight suit, just good ol combat BDUs for the ground fighting marine. She took lacked the suit and was in her lab clothing, a simple blue skirt that stopped just above her knees and hugged her hips nicely, a button up shirt, and white lab coat. not a button undone, perfectly dressed.

She was even more easy on the eyes now.

She looked at him, opened her mouth,,, then closed it, finally. She set her mouth into a firm line. "I wanted to thank you for saving me back on the last operation."

He blinked, then gave a small grin. "No problem, doc. It was my job, after all." he replied, uncrossing his arms and tilting his head. "You're welcome though, Doc. As a favor you can make sure not to fall down any ice slopes in the near future, alright?" he teased.

She stared, eyes narrowing slightly before she replied. "Noted, Sergeant." She stared a moment longer, then she cleared her throat. "Now, back to the business at hand." she turned and made her way back towards her team.

William watched her go, hey hips swayed just a tad more than he remembered. And as usual, he enjoyed the show she put on. "Hoorah," he whispered, following after her. They joined the others and soon they were loading onto the Pelican for the closer inspection of the object.

The Pelican's engines roared to life, The Hanger bay doors opened and they were off towards the object. All the while, William felt a knot

forming in his stomach at the idea of possibly walking into yet another dangerous situation filled with unknowns, they didn't even have good intel so the saying "If you're going into hell, may as well go in with good intel." didn't apply either. So, FUBAR all around.

After a minute, the pilot's voice came over the com. "_Uh, doctor. We're gettingâ€¦ something weird on the com channels._" he said, sounding baffled.

"Which ones?" Asuka asked from her seat, frowning in thought.

"_All of em, ma'am._" The pilot responded. "_Trying to make sense of itâ€¦ its weird._"

That made William frown too, okay, not even ten minutes into the inspection and already things were getting buggy.

"Could just be feedback from the energy core." One of the scientists suggested. Another agreed, the others held their peace, probably waiting for more information from the pilot.

"Could be," Asuka mumbled, raising a hand to her mouth and staring off in thought like she tended to do in such situations. "Perhaps we should attempt to reply to the com channels?" she said.

"_Ma'am, are you sure?_" The pilot was unsure about that and William didn't blame him.

"Do it," She bluntly replied.

A moment of silence, finally. The Pelican jerked left and caused the people in the bay to grip their straps and release various sounds of surprise, William himself grunting a small "whoa" as the Pelican settled again. "Pilot, the hell was that?" he asked.

"_Sorry, Sergeant. When I responded to the hails, the thing did somethingâ€¦ its _still_ doing something._" The pilot responded. "_I'm moving off to a safe distance._"

"Let me into the cockpit, I want to see." Asuka unstrapped herself from her seat, William shook his head and said.

"Doctor, sit back down," she gave him a scathing look, and he returned it with a firm stare. "We're going back to a safe distance. You can observe from there, be patient." he continued to stare at her and she right back, eventually, she relented and sat back down, strapping herself back in and looking a bit miffed.

The Pelican accelerated, then decelerated and the pilot cleared her to enter the cockpit. She did so and what she saw made her pause to consider what the object was. The rings around the core of the object were now moving, the three of them shifting and spinning in opposing directions and the now the core was pulsing with energy spikes, as if it were a heartbeat. It was amazing, to be sure. For Asuka, this could mean a lot of things, but they'd need a closer look still to understand exactly what this thing was.

"It doesn't appear hostile," she said to herself, but the pilot spoke anyways.

"No, it doesn't, ma'am." he leaned forward slightly, staring intently. Finally, he said, "Shouldn't I try to get closer?"

She nodded after a moment of thought. "Yes. Slowly though."

The pilot nodded, and the Pelican slowly accelerated towards the object at a crawl speed. Up close it was even more massive than she knew it to be, but from the cockpit of a pelican many of the UNSC's ships would be the same. As they drew closer, she thought she could hear the pulses of energy the core of the object gave off.

"Are the channels clear?" she asked.

The pilot checked, then nodded. "Yeah, they're clear nowâ€¦ weird."

That was weird, unless the object itself was sending the hail on any frequency it could find and when it received a reply the rings activated and now it was activeâ€¦ but active for what purpose was still unclear and that was why Asuka wanted to get a closer look. She was positive now this thing wasn't Forerunner. _So, who left it behind? _She thought.

They got closer.

The core pulsed, the wave passed them and before they could ask what was that a bolt of energy lashed out and gripped the Pelican, systems went haywire and the pilot began to work the controls, trying to pull away. "Come on girl! You can do it!" he tried to pull away as the energy held them, and slowly, they drifted closer to the object. "Come on!"

Asuka gripped the seats of the pilot and co-pilot, looking at the bolt that connect them to the object. "Can you do something!?" she asked.

"Trying, doc!" the pilot growled.

And thenâ€¦ the feeling of weightlessness, nausea and loss of balance. The stars themselves became streaks and the Pelican rumbled a moment, then! They were somewhere else entirely, coming to a jerking halt in which Asuka was thrown into the back of the seat and falling onto her back with a pained groan.

"Come on, Wes." The pilot said, glancing at his co-pilot. "Give me something. Where are we?"

"I dunno! Powers down, we're driftingâ€¦ systems are dead, whatever that was, it burned us out." The co-pilot, Wes replied with a tone of irritation. "Trying to bring out bird back to life, give me a minute."

Asuka groaned, sitting up and then standing. She smoothed her skirt and peered outside the window and frowned. "Nowâ€¦ that is interesting," She said.

The pilots looked out and saw another one of the same objects. This one pointing back the way they came from, or so they thought they came from. And it too pulsed with energy at its core. Asuka stared at it

in thought.

So, if she was right this object was linked with the one they had been trying to inspect and when they neared it it had "shot" them to this one and judging by the fact power was down it probably killed the smaller crafts power cells. If that was the case, well, they would have to wait until the UNSC sent someone else through to retrieve them, if any. She hoped they would.

"How much air do we have in here?" she asked.

"An hour, two hours?" the pair shrugged.

"â€|Great." Asuka muttered.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Exploration**_**-Class Frigate **_**Eye of the Beholder**_**, Hanger. 0150 Hours.

>"What the hell was that!?" Commander Massey shouted as he watched the Pelican that the science team had taken to get a closer look at get sucked into the object and then disappeared in a blue stream so fast you almost assume the thing fired them off like a MAC round. Which it very damn well could have! He stared at it.

"Sir, orders?" Navigations looked at him.

The Commander considered his options. He had to know if they were alive, if so, where did they go? If not, he had to ensure he at least looked. Send a probe? No, too unreliableâ€| he could always take the _Eye of the Beholder _and attempt whatever the hell had just happened. He weighed the options carefully, then ordered a connection to the _Hail Mary_.

A moment the screen was blank, then it snapped on and appeared Rear Admiral Richard. "_My bridge crew just showed me what happened, what is it_"

"Admiral, sir. I want your clearance to approach the object and attempt to follow Pelican five-seven through, sir." Massey stated calmly.

The Rear Admiral blinked and frowned. "_Granted, if you don't return within the hour. I'll assume you didn't make it. Godspeed_" he saluted simply.

Massey knew the Admiral would agree to it. The Eye of the Beholder wasn't part of his group nor was it a tactically important ship, plus if this thing lead anywhere they would need to find out eventually so what better time than the present? That in mind. "Get us closer to the object! We're following after that Pelican!" he ordered.

A pause, then the bridge crew accepted the order.

The _Eye of the Beholder _moved towards the object and as they closed in, the pulsing energy grew brighter. And finally, when they were closer enough, the same bolt of energy lashed out, catching the Frigate, several more. Systems went haywire as the power surged through the ship. "How are we holding?" he asked, unflinching.

"Sir! Systems are going on and off, but we're still in acceptable levels!" Operations replied, eyes on her console. "Reactor at one hundred and fifty percent! Power building up!" she reported. "At this rate we'll overload it! We have to-" the feeling passed through the ship and with the blink of an eye they were somewhere else entirely. "ventâ€¦ the reactor." she finished.

Massey stared out at the blackness of the space around them. "Systems check?"

"We're good, sirâ€¦ reactor dropping back to seventy percent." Operations reported. "Minor overloads in small systems, but we are still space worthy. Key systems are intact."

"Good, scan for our wayward Pelican." he ordered, choosing to ignore the second object that was parked right next to their ship, he'd deal with that later. For now he had personnel in the black.

"Scanning, sir." Not a tick later. "Found them. Pelican is intact. Power is offline and its drifting."

"Lets go get our bird back," Massey replied, leaning back into his command chair and yawning. God he needed some sleep. The _Eye of the Beholder _moved towards the drifting Pelican. Soon enough, the Pelican was retrieved and its personnel were brought to the bridge where Massey was waiting for them.

They stepped into the bridge, he turned to them, "How was the ride?"

"Jarring, sir." Gunnery Sergeant William replied, cracking his neck. "Thanks for the quick rescue." he added, saluting.

"Don't mention it," Massey muttered and stared at the second object as it waited for something to be shot back. "Welp, bring us in, lets see if this thing works how I think it does." he said. "Full speed, bring us into jump space for that thing."

"Aye, sir!" Navigations wasn't as hesitant the second time around. The Frigate approached the device, thenâ€¦ a second shot and they were face first with the _Hail Mary_. Klaxons blared.

"Hard to port!" Massey shouted, the _Eye of the Beholder _moved left turned as it moved at the _Hail Mary_. The two ships scrapped against each other, the _Hail Mary_'s Hard-light shielding snapped into place while the Eye's hull screechedâ€¦ and continued on with nothing more than a scratched paint and slightly drained shielding for both ships.

"Damnâ€¦ that was close." Navigations said, chuckling a bit.

Massey didn't say anything.

"We're being hailed by the Hail Mary, sir." Communications reported.

"Patch em through." the Commander said, relieved.

And on the screen appeared the Rear Admiral, looking bored. "_Any particular reason why you kissed my ships nose, Commander_?" he asked

as if this near miss between a Frigate and Cruiser were commonplace.

Massey shrugged. "I wasn't aware the object had a "drift" effect when ships travelled to and fro, sorry, Admiral. But, gotta sayâ€¦ this thing works pretty well."

"_To and fro_" The Admiral raised his brows.

The Commander nodded. "Sir, there's two of them. This one connects to another at unknown coordinates, it appears to be a linked pairâ€¦ able to send ships from one to the other within seconds." Massey explained, entwining his fingers before himself. "Plays hell with our electronics though."

The Rear Admiral was silent in thought as he stared at something off screen for a minute before he spoke again. "_I see, I'll report this to CentCom. They'll want to know about this. Good work, Commander_."

Massey nodded graciously. "Thank you, Admiral." the screen went out and the Commander sighed. "This is gonna be troubleâ€¦ I just know it."

****End of Chapter one****

* * *

><p>There's chapter one, folks! Like? If so, you know what to do!

****PS. As pointed out, I believe I overly nerfed the UNSC's ship capacity, so, I edited it a bit and put a higher number of colonies. Buuut, still not going too high with the second one. ****

****There! I did it, I got off my lazy butt and gave the UNSC 7000 Ships! IT'S OVER SIX THOUSAND! DOES THAT NUMBER SATISFY?! DOES EET?! -froths at mouth-
>**

3. Chapter two

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Two****

****September 25, 2581. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC Central Command Station _**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 0400 Hours.

>In high orbit over Earth, the cradle of Humanity and its birthplace millions of years prior. Now it was the most secure planets the UNSC had. The ODG, or Orbital Defense Grid, had been recreated and took form in the eighty Defense Platforms around the Earth, using micro bursts of thrusters to create a steadily shifting web of the latest super weapon tech known as Magnetic Plasma Cannon or MPC. Each station was outfitted with one of these long range, high precision cannons. Along with a secondary, smaller more conventional MAC gun as a backup while the MPC recharged and cooled between shots. An order for fifteen new stations was currently being met with the

new ones being mounted with the newer Forward Particle Projector cannons.

With the threat of war gone, CentCom put a lot of effort into rebuilding the lost planets and getting their defenses back up to acceptable levelsâ€¦ for nine years, now it was all about rebuilding, trading and learning about the other species, promoting good will and advancement for all. Hell, the UNSC's attempt of the Rehabilitation of the Jiralhanae was a sign of this. A lot of Navy and Army forces would have been content to blast the beasts back to their homeworld and left them there to rot with the rest of the Prophets.

And after stripping them of their Slipspace and galactic travel capabilities the UNSC had done that for the better part of seven years. Then something changed, nobody knew what, but first it was Fleet Admiral Hood was announcing that in a gesture of good will towards the "forgotten" species left broken by the war, they were going to launch the "Jiralhanae Uplift" campaign on Doisac, the Jiralhanae homeworld.

The opening days of the program were, by UNSC reports, "Proceeding, but strained". It wasn't much of a surprise for that, Brutes weren't the most civil of beings so when tensions rose and they got snappy, humanity had to crack the whip. And they did, in a way. Instead of trying to uplift the entire race, they took in volunteers from the Brutes. Those who wanted to learn and live outside a world of religious massacre. And the few that joined in the initial stages had been older and younger brutes following the elders.

What had happened had been completely unexpected. It seemed elder Brutes were more clever and adaptable than their species gave them credit for. As they were quick to talk, slower to anger and certainly more patient than the average ape. The second colony established in the local system had been a success in the following years. Now, it was a Jiralhanae/Human/Sangheili mixed colony where humans and Sangheili attempted to teach the finer points of Martial strength in Peace times, about how to trade and negotiate.

Sure, the Brutes were still under house arrest in their own system, but it was slowly moving process to get them ready to rejoin the galactic species again as a fellow space faring race. Humanity was now trying to act like Teachers.

This was also evident by the last twenty years of teaching the Sangheili how to run their own house without scratching their heads at how to make the toilet flush. Civil war been a very real threat on Sanghelios and its colonies after the Didact war, but it had been slowly dying out and with humanity's aid the Sangheili could stand on their own now, still very martial but at least now the threat of a massive civil war wasn't looming over their heads. The Arbiter of Sanghelios kept a tight grip and watchful gaze for dissent.

But it was costly, very costly. Between the uplifting effort, terraforming operations across the glassed worlds and the buy of materials from both Sangheili and Kig-Yar species. Humanities repair bill must have been in the upper billionsâ€¦ maybe trillions. Only the bean counters in ONI probably knew the exact costs of everything that was going on in UNSC space.

And then came the discovery of the object inside Pluto, so far dubbed

"Pluto Device" by some of the brass on the Atlas. The device itself was a mystery as any deep scans they tried to take from it were disrupted by whatever was powering the thing, so accurate and reliable scans were out of the question. They couldn't even accurately date the things age. Only that it was really, really old.

And now the Brass was stumped with what exactly to do with it since battle group Mojave had sent a ship through for some recon to check out the local system around the other device at the receiving end. They had found a single planet that had an atmosphere capable of supporting life and it did support life, there were indigenous species of various flora and fauna. A garden world ripe for the taking.

But not only that, they attempt communications with the fleet from across the Relay, They couldn't raise any UNSC, Sangheili or Kig-Yar frequencies. That Device had tossed a ship so far that there no known species presence in the system, at all. No signs of other intelligent life in the system sides the device itself.

It was all very exciting and that was why a meeting of the committee and UNSC brass had been called aboard the Super Station that was the Atlas.

A meeting that one Lieutenant Micheal Price was late to.

That was why he was power walking through the halls like a man on a mission to save the Earth. He was late by two minutes and he was sure he was going to receive some flack for it when he got there. He passed marines, scientists and engineers as he walked through the soft gray halls, overhead lights listing by as he moved along. You'd never guess by his tardiness that Micheal was actually a member of ONI Section III. But he was and a damn good spook at what he did, he was a liaison between the ONI headquarters on Reach and the Committee of Earth during such meetings, he was effectively the person who negotiated for ONI in these things, gave the opinion and views, safety and security and all that nice stuff ONI was known for.

He stopped at a lift, stepped inside and after a quick ride, stepped off and proceeded down another hallway. There, he spotted the doors that would lead him to the committee chamber. At the door sides were a pair of guards, each holding the latest issue MA5E rifles. And judging by the MJOLNIR Mark. VI [Gen 2] Variants they were wearing. They were Spartan-IVs.

Both bore the rank of Chief Petty Officer. The saw the Lieutenant, saluted and the one on the left spoke, voice muffled by the helmet. "Lieutenant, sir, they're waiting for you inside!" he turned, tapping a key. The doors opened and with a return salute, Micheal stepped past them and into the committee chamber.

Before him inside the circular room sat thirty individuals, chatting amongst themselves while it appeared they were waiting. Great, he was not only late but held up the meeting, he was definitely going to get flak for this.

A few heads to greet his entrance and he saluted crisply. "Sirs, sorry for the hold up." he said, moving to his assigned seat around the center of the room, a single large holoprojector sat. And it was

then he noted that some of the most powerful ,if not the most powerful, people in the UNSC were in the room with him.

You had Admiral Terrance Hood seated off to the left, stooping in age but eyes still sharp as finely honed knives. He was no longer head of the UNSC, having stepped down and made way for Fleet Admiral Leonardo "Leon" Petrov to take his place as head of the UNSC a decade ago, Now Hood served more a highly respected mentor to the younger Fleet Admiral.

Leonardo himself was young for a Fleet Admiral, at only forty-five the man was a bit of a legend in his accomplishments navy boot camp, his service record was filled with citations well received praise for his actions against the Insurrectionist and Loyalist forces in the outer colonies fifteen years prior, he had graduated from the Navy academy with top honors and head of his class, promoted to Junior Lieutenant for it. Then when the innies started riling themselves up for more bombings against the UNSC Leon stepped up and impressed everyone with his seven total victories against the Loyalists in space combat, and five successful sweeps of Innies bases in hollowed out asteroids along certain systems. He had went from Junior Lieutenant to Captain in under two years for these efforts.

His jump to Fleet Admiral happened ten years ago when Hood personally stepped down and named that his successor would be, the then Rear Admiral, Leonardo Petrov. Since then, Hood had been acting as a mentor for the man and their decisions were fair and they were respected.

Hood was always a shrewd man when it came to such decisions and it seemed he was passing this skill onto Leon. Micheal was glad for it, their decisions had put the UNSC into a strong position and in good relations with the Sangheili and Kig-Yar at large. Even with the rumors surrounding Hoods involvement with the assassination of Admiral Parangosky in 2560 and the execution of the Black Operations team known only as "Kilo-Five".

That entire incident was denied by half of ONI while the other half hid beneath their desks while the flak started flying. Micheal remembered it well, more than a dozen people inside ONI were named for the involvement of a plot that had been sanctioned by Parangosky to attempt to cripple the then weakened Sangheili empire so that they could never threaten the UNSC again. Sound in practice, but it was morally messed.

And then, during a night on 2560, Parangosky didn't report in with the head of ONI, Serin Osman, and when she was found in her home with two shots to the head. ONI had scrambled to cover it up so fast that everyone noticed within a week. Shortly afterwards ONI head Serin Osman had gone under the radar.

Reports from there are sketchy at best, many had theories on what had transpired leading up to that and the execution of Kilo-Five. Micheal didn't care for it, that was years ago and the new head of ONI was far more agreeable in his opinion.

Speaking of the head spook. Micheal thought wryly, it seemed Head Spook wouldn't be here to see the meeting, instead it was just Lieutenant Commander McCarthy, another ONI Spook with Section III like Micheal. Then you had the civilian Committee members, sixteen in

total. Two ONI officials, and twelve UNSC brass. That was the Committee.

It was a pain and overly large.

"Alright, take your seats and pay attention!" Leonardo called from his own seat, The man's dress uniform was spotless, his chest full of medals and his voice called for total dominance with a just a slight accent of Italian nature. When everyone was quieted down, he looked them over once and it was as if a weight passed over them under the careful gaze. "Alright, you've all been called here within the last five hours to discuss something that has been brought to our attention by the UNSC _Eye of the Beholder_."

He looked up. "Majestic, if you will?" he asked.

"Of course, Fleet Admiral." The holoprojector activated and before them a twelve foot tall angel appeared, the avatar of _Atlas_' Sixth Generation Smart AI. Majestic. The angels wings spread across the room, then folded behind it and the being disappeared. In its place was the object from Pluto. The objects three rings were spinning in a certain way opposing the others, it was kinda dizzying if one stared at it too long.

Majestic's voice rang out. "Initial scans put the object at Eight hundred and twenty meters in width. Twenty-two thousand, eleven hundred meters in length and height wise it is about one thousand and fifty-four." there was a pause. "Scaling now for a comparison."

The projector flickered and the object was placed beside the UNSC _Infinity_-Class Command Ship _Deadalus_. The result was that the object was easily the largest thing they had ever found floating in Z-gee that wasn't made by Forerunner, Covenant or Human hands, Of course if you compared it to High Charity and the Unyielding Hierophant built by the Covenant years ago during the great war and the Halo Rings the things size was about as impressive as setting an eraser next to a motorcycle. Not very.

But the fact no known faction constructed it made the object itself more interesting.

"Additionally," Majestic spoke again. "The object appears to act as a point-to-point transfer system, a pair being linked together to send ships to and fro themselves in a near instant manner. If the data readings from the _Eye of the Beholder _are correct." a pause, "I wish they had an AI onboard, I think the data would have been more accurate. Just my opinion."

Micheal could hear the shrug in the AI's words and inwardly chuckled at it. Majestic had a sense of emotion more common in Sixth Generation Smart AIs. It was increasingly human.

Fleet Admiral Leon spoke again. "Noted. Majestic." he said, humouring the AI on its subtle recommendation that the ship be outfitted with an AI. "Tell us of its make."

"Fleet Admiral," Majestic acknowledged. And the projector shifted again, this time to a chart of materialsâ€¦ the list was rather short. "These are the current materials we can find that make up the hull of the structureâ€¦ again, readings are inconclusive due to the

objects off power source and its natural toughness. The metal appears remarkably dense. General readings put it at seventy percent more dense than Titanium-A plating without affecting the structure of the material so much it doesn't become brittle."

"In laymen's terms, Majestic?" One of the civilian committee spoke up, frowning.

"It can take a hell of a beating from our conventional weapons. I imagine if you ordered Mojave to engage the object it would take a solid fifteen minutes before we broke its hull away with MAC and missile rounds." A pause, "I would not advise that as well, gentlemen. Energy readings place that sort of energy in that condensed form were to be released, though this is speculation. We could be looking at a near-super nova level of energy release."

That got a stir out of everyone, even Micheal was a little put off that something so dangerous was just sitting there in their home system. What was it? Could it be something else than a simple transport? A bomb of some kind? A weapon? All these questions swam in Micheal's head as he stared at the hologram of the object.

Majestic broke the thoughtfully cautious silence. "Moving on, when _Eye of the Beholder _itself made a jump," the AI wasn't sure what to call it. "Though the Device, it came upon another. Their Pelican that had gotten caught in the first jump had lost power, apparently it kills smaller power sources. Including probes. But the Frigate made it through with just some minor overloads." another pause to let the committee absorb the information.

"What about the planet that Mojave found on the other side when they were cleared to make a mass jump through the device?" Terrance Hood asked, his own aging voice a rumble in the large room.

"They found several planets, Admiral. Five to be exact in orbit around the central star." A new image appeared, an overhead view of the large star at the other end of the device. Five planets appeared. "A garden world, the second planet from the star," said planet blinked on the overhead view and it zoomed in for a full color 3D model. "Probes launched by Battlegroup Mojave show human friendly biosphere, closer inspection by the UNSC Frigates _John Bars _and _War Hawk _revealed the atmosphere is very breathable and there is indigenous life. Planet appears to be made up of grasslands, mountain ranges in the upper north of the planet. The surface also sports a good sixtyty-seven percent water coverage. Further testing required but so far, it checks out as human safe." Majestic's Avatar reappeared. "In all, I'd give this planet a four out of five in the hospitable scale. It could be a bit cooler. But I guess you can't complain."

Micheal could already feel the mass opinion of the room as to what they were planning for the newly discovered Garden world that the UNSC had stumbled upon thanks to the Device in the Ice. Yes, that rhymed. They would all vote to have it colonized by the UNSC and likely the surrounding planets to be Terraformed so that other species, maybe the Sangheili and Kig-Yar would get a planet to themselves as a further sign of goodwill to the trading partners of the UNSC.

Micheal chose this time speak. "So, what are we gonna call our new

colony?" he asked bluntly, he knew the choice they would make. It was a garden World on the doorstep of a new unexplored part of space, hell, once they map the stars of the sector they could start expanding outwards from there.

Half the committee gave him surprised looks, the other half just looked thoughtful of his question. To the surprised half he said, "Oh don't look at me like that, we all know we're going to make it a colony, so, what are we going to call it?" he asked again.

"Shanxi." Leon spoke up from his seat. "The Garden world will be called Shanxi. And the neighboring star will be known as Prometheus." There was no room for disagreement in his tone as he looked over the committee members, giving them each a simple stare.

"Shanxi colony in the Prometheus System." One aging civilian member said, stroking his grey beard. "Like Prometheus gave fire to man, this device has given us a world?" he ventured.

Leonardo nodded an affirmative. That was his line of thought, besides. A new system to colonize deserved a grand name to go down in the history books after all. Soon, the committee gave their mass assent, Micheal and McCarthy included gave their assent. So, their new colony, Shanxi of the Prometheus System.

But now, another issue needed to be addressed. A much more sensitive one.

And it was Admiral Terrance Hood who brought it to light. "Should we inform our allies of this discovery as well?" he asked, not bothering to elaborate on "allies", obviously meaning the Kig-Yar and Sangheili.

While it was true that the Kig-Yar, Sangheili and UNSC were prospering because of the three way trading circle they set up. It was a trade circle kept at arms length, even after two and half decades of peaceful coexistence with the Sangheili and Kig-Yar, tensions between the older civilian and military populations was still tense in sectors and in the higher branches. While there were a dozen "mixed" colonies where a pair or all three of them lived together, the inner and outer colonies still felt the bite of the great war.

And it showed, when one committee member from the civilian side said. "No, this is a UNSC matter and should stay that way, least for the moment."

The woman beside him disagreed, offering a daring proposal. "I say we terraform the two other planets, then once they're within acceptable range, offer them to the Sangheili and Kig-yar as a gesture of goodwill," she looked them over. "As a sign we wish to proceed forward _with _them. Not without."

"You take this "mantle" business too seriously, Sharon." The man grumbled beside her.

The other committee members showed their support for both sides of the suggestions, Hood and a majority of the Brass, including Leonardo, stayed silent. McCarthy and Micheal wisely stayed silent. Finally, Micheal nodded to McCarthy.

"We agree with miss Willis." Micheal said, gesturing to himself and McCarthy, who nodded beside him. "We establish a colony on Shanxi, then when it begins producing resources, we use a quarter of those resources to begin terraforming efforts on the other two planets furthest from the star to make them habitable for the Kig-Yar and Sangheili." he sat back down, feeling Hood and Leonardo's gaze on him, he stared right back.

Leonardo spoke and everyone quieted down at the sound of his voice. "I too agree with Miss Willis. If we are to uphold the Mantle, then we must eject our suspicion and old hatreds out the airlock and accept that Humanity has been given a duty by those who came before." Leonardo leaned forward and peered at Majestic. "I give my permission for this effort."

"I give mine." Micheal said.

"You got mine." McCarthy raised a hand.

"Mine too!" Willis smiled.

Soon, three quarters of the committee gave their assent to the effort that Shanxi would represent for Humanity, that they had seriously taken up the Mantle of Responsibility left to them by the Forerunner's before their destruction at the hands of their own last resort array that was the Halo weapons system. Micheal himself wasn't a "believer" in the Mantle. He found it impractical that a single species should govern the others simply because it had superior technology, and with the forerunner caches, they had vastly superior technology and now they were to use it and a moral high ground to "guide" the other species to betterment?

But it was because of the Mantle that they were even bothering with the Jiralhanae in the first place. Since the "cleansing" of ONI years ago, many inside the Spook central command had started to believe in the whole "Mantle", as the Forerunners were the closest things to Gods that humanity had. And it was those Gods that decreed that Humanity would be their successors to the great Mantle of Responsibility.

And worms will spit acid, giant machines will attack and the Forerunners will have been given the Mantle by someone else before them. Micheal thought, rolling his eyes and almost sighing. He couldn't deny the positive effect it had on the large portions of the fleet though. The idea to many that Humanity had been chosen by the Forerunners, the single most advanced species to come before them, to uphold the galaxy and see to its careful and prospering growth was both exciting and morally uplifting. It inspired many religious types start rethinking their ways, youngsters were already talking about enlisting because of the new motto.

"Enlist today, help uphold the Mantle."

Forerunners, even extinct they ran a good ad campaign it seemed. It gave a great many of humanity something to rally behind.

"Mojave will be on station to provide security for the new colony during colonization efforts," Leonardo went on to explain to the others, now that it had been agreed to go forward with colonization

of Shanxi. It was time for the UNSC brass to start talking budgets and timelines. "we'll prepare three Colony ships to begin the colonization effort."

He paused, then said. "And get me a connection to the Sangheili Arbiter and Kig-Yar High Council. I'll brief them on our discovery and stance." he said, and the silent order to leave was followed, Micheal and the other committee members stepped outside the large room, marching down the hall towards the lift that would take them to VIP lounge to wait for the official word from Fleet Admiral Petrov.

Soon, Shanxi would be colonized and Humanity, along with its allies, would be moving forward into a brighter future together. And that was good for everyone. But Micheal had to wonder, did Humanity prosper because it was practical? Or because it was inspired merely by the idea of the "Mantle of Responsibility passed unto them by the Forerunners? It irked Micheal to think it was simply because they believed that being chosen by the Forerunners to uphold some ideal was why humanity suddenly to start playing fair.

"Humanity was lost, now it is found as its hands grasp the handles of our ancient mantle. As you must take responsibility for this mantle, so too must you bear responsibility for those in its shadow." McCarthy said beside him, reading Micheal's expression. "Still thinking about the Mantle business, huh?"

Micheal glared at him in exasperation. "Please, McCarthy, I hear that enough from my father and wife , I don't need you preaching this Mantle business too." He said, sighing loudly. He kept his voice low, no need to spark a debate in the hall about it.

"Sorry, Micheal. Just you get so worked up over nothing," McCarthy chuckled, shaking his head. "Mantle or not, Humanity is prospering and wants to share. Why stop it? Helps everyone, keeps the others off our backs and makes sure we have allies when shit gets tough. Who cares if its because we just want to, or if we're doing it for some ideal called," he air quoted. "The Mantle of Responsibility."

"Watch your mouth," Miss Willis said from behind them,. The dark haired, green eyed woman was glaring at McCarthy with zealousness. "The Mantle is a great gift and responsibility, we as Humanity should be honoured to have chosen for such a prestigious position as Custodians of the Galaxy. You'd do well to remember our new role in the galaxy." she marched past them, heels clicking as she walked.

Micheal sighed. "See? The Mantle has become a goddamn religion. You hear about it on Earth, the coloniesâ€¦ hell! Sangheili themselves are starting to treat humans with almost religious respect when they learned of the whole Mantle business!" he growled. "I justâ€¦ don't want to believe that humanity is becomingâ€¦ fair and just because we think we have a dutyâ€¦"

"You want to believe we started being those because we were becoming "better" naturally without any outside influence side our own decisions?" McCarthy raised a brow. "Micheal. You're looking a gift horse in the mouth. Don't take any teeth, we're good, that's all that matters. Mantle or no." he patted his friend on the back, then grinned. "Now, lets get some beer. I have a feeling Petrov will be

busy for awhile he speaks with the Sangheili and Kig-Yar."

"Yeah," Micheal relented, forcing a small smile. "Sure."

****End of Chapter Two****

****Yup, that's right people, the Mantle of Responsibility is going to play a big role in Humanity's decisions as the story progresses****!** I shall elaborate further on that at a later date for now know it is a growing religion within Humanity and it has even touched some of the Covenant species, as also noted. Also, yes. I am ramming exposition down the reader's throats, sorry about that. Its just setting up an entire 30 years of change and progress is pretty tough without leaving a really long Author Note detailing it all, y'know? Anyways. G'night/day! **

4. Chapter three

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Three****

Author Notes: Now, this next chapter i've had mixed feelings about for awhile, many a time has my finger hovered over the delete function with this in my folder, but, ultimately, after some editing I decided to post it up instead of getting right to FCW._

****January 10, 2582. Military Calendar.**
>UNSC Colony Shanxi, Prometheus System. 1100 Hours.
****Almost a full year had passed since the Discovery of the Pluto Device and the discovery of the garden world named Shanxi thanks to the Device and colonization efforts of the world had gone smoothly. It was now home to more than Two-hundred thousand civilians, a military presence of thirty thousand marine personnel groundside via seven UNSC military bases and training camps. It also boasted two shipyards since the planet was rich in valuable metals. One of the few planets rich in the materials to crate Titanium-A plating mounted on most UNSC ships. The grasslands were fertile and crops grew healthy year round, local flora and fauna was being studied around the clock. It was a paradise of peace and discovery.**

In Orbit, the battlegroup Mojave was still stationed as the colony's defense force. Seven ships, since the Supercarrier and three Destroyers had been pulled back and reassigned to the recovering Outer Colonies again. To make up for the lessened fleet strength, the planet had been provided with Fifty Orbital Defense Platforms, same as the ones that orbited Earth. Each was armed with an MPC, 210 centimetres of Titanium-A armor plating and Hardlight Shield emitters. It also sported twenty four Point-defense Gatling guns and four triple Barrelled "Cerberus" laser cannons near the MPC's barrel base. Not to mention each platform had a Wing Division of forty Broadsword fighters. And twenty Sabre fighters per station. All in all, Shanxi was a heavily defended colony that the UNSC was not taking chances with.

The colony's richness was so vast that the UNSC was even having trouble with unauthorized smuggling of various materials off the planets surface. Not even a year and people were trying to smuggle

stuff off the planet's surface. That had forced a bit more security in the transit hub for trading vessel inspections before and exiting Shanxi space. UNSC CentCom was already forwarding terraforming plans for the third and fourth planets from the sun so that they could be offered to the Sangheili and Kig-Yar as was proposed.

It just wasn't Shanxi however, terraforming efforts across the UNSC had been taking place before its discovery and in the past year the UNSC could safely say it had four more colonies, each working around the clock to provide a much welcomed economic boost to an already prospering UNSC and its Allies. It was a good time all around.

But with every good day there's always that one speck of dust that makes it into your eye and annoys you. In this case? The discovery of a second Device at the edges of the Prometheus system, this one too was dormant. The UNSC had decreed it a no fly zone and station four ships as sentries to monitor it. UNSC brass had been debating it about for three weeks now, most people didn't care about it, others saw it as another chance to expand further, and most wanted to ignore it until there was a firmer hold on Prometheus.

For now, it appeared the UNSC had adopted the "observe and wait" method against it.

UNSC Colony Shanxi, Training Facility B11 "_**New Hope**_**".
1100 Hours.

>The staccato of weapons fire rumbled the air of the Training Facility New Hope followed by the voices of marine recruits as they fired off bursts from their MA6K rifles as they rushed from cover to cover as the automatic turrets pelted the area with their own volleys of stun rounds. Men and Women hit the deck and crawled into cover then the stun round impacted their legs and caused them to crumble. Shouts of covering fire and orders moved through the gunfire.

From an observation post above the training field. Captain Riley "Slate" MacMillan watched with crossed arms as the four dozen recruits moved across the field, leaving their cover to rescue their "wounded" comrades and drag them behind cover. His cool grey eyes moving over the various lot of them bogged down by the automatic turrets, which had a second feature that had been added four years ago.

One of the turrets raised its barrel, and a secondary barrel beneath the primary fired out with a loud bang, a grenade round arced over heir cover and exploded, tagging them five of the trainees in bright blue "kill paint", all five would have been dead had that been a real 30mm RDE. (Remote Detonation Explosive) fired by the Stick Detonators.

A ping sounded out and the five of them were marked on an overhead board as "Dead" along with twelve others.

MacMillan shook his head and turned away. Moving out of the observation post and down to the ground level where a Warthog was waiting for him. He grabbed his ODS helmet on the way out, holding it in his left hand while he hopped into the passenger seat where Second Lieutenant Marcus "Beef" Brant was sitting in the driver seat.

"Drive," MacMillan said.

The hog jerked forward as it accelerated and drove off towards east end of the facility where the VT Hanger was located. VT tech was using advanced Forerunner tech to literally create real environments using Hardlight technology. This allowed for a wider range of training exercises inside a single building. This technology was very expensive and only available to the Special Forces branch of the UNSC. As such, only SPARTANs and ODSTs got access to it.

And for today, MacMillan had it reserved to test his squads new recruit. A Corporal John "Shepard" Price. His Service Record appeared on a tablet that MacMillan took from the Hog's storage compartment. The boy was barely out of selection at twenty-two. His accuracy ratings were above average and he was smart, showed an aptitude for a wide range of skills and was picked out as a potential SPARTAN-IV candidate, instead had chosen to become an ODST and join the 22nd ODST Regiment when he was a Lance Corporal.

Also came from a military family. Dad's a Lieutenant in the Office of Naval Intelligence and his mother is a Lieutenant, junior grade, serving as a Coms officer aboard the UNSC Destroyer Far Away deployed to the Outer Colonies. His record was spotless, high grades pre-enlistment as well. All in all, a damn gold mine of potential. MacMillan thought, setting the tablet down.

That was why he had chosen John to be drafted onto his squad the moment he cleared Orbital Drop Shock Trooper training on Jericho VII and had him shipped out here to Shanxi as an assignment with MacMillan's ODST team, callsign "Delta-7".

Marcus pulled up next to the hanger. MacMillan stepped out and saw the rest of his team gathered outside, four of them. From left to right you Corporals Jennifer "Sharps" Holland and Gerald "Ares" Williams. Next was Sergeant Gary "Wrecker" Sanderson. And the last of them? Corporal John "Shepard" Price.

"Take it easy on him, sir," Marcus said from his while MacMillan slid his helmet onto his head. "It's his first day on the Regiment."

"Right," MacMillan's voice was muffled by the helmet as his visor polarized and obscured his face.

Gary snapped off a salute. "Captain MacMillan, sir!" His shout alerted the rest of them to his presence, apparently they had been chatting animatedly if they didn't notice a bloody warthog drive up to them. Suppose he couldn't blame them, not much for an ODST to do out here than train, eat, sleep and train some more.

The other snapped off salutes and MacMillan walked up to John, scrutinizing him. "What the hell kinda callsign is Shepard?" it was a rhetorical question. "How'd a kid like you pass selection?" he added, more distastefully. From his unpolarized visor John didn't show any disheartenment from his words. Good, kid could take a verbal beating from his superior without flinching. "Well, fine. Alright, Priceâ€¦ time to see if your test scores were a sign of skill and not just for your bad looks. I've taken the liberty of barrowing two squads of recruits from the local staff and you're gonna take a brief case from the second level and in under four minutes." he gestured them inside. "Am I clear?"

"Crystal clear, sir," John replied.

John stepped past the Captain and into the hanger, which had taken the form of a two storey building, the first floor being comprised of three rooms, a long hall and a stairwell to the second floor, which was made up of four rooms. Each level had a window or two for extra entry and firing points. And spread out amongst the rooms were twenty marine recruits, each armed with a pair of KP grenades and MA6Ks. Along with the standard issue Marine Corps BDUs. Five were on outer patrol around the area. They didn't see or hear the team of ODSs enter. The VT hanger itself was twenty by twenty-five meters in length and width, and fifteen meters high. It offered ample space. The VT field itself was Seventeen by twenty meters large. The free space was used for observation and holographic hardlight projectors to add color and sounds to the environment.

Truly a work of art if MacMillan could say so himself.

The grass beneath their feet was emulated in their helmets via their coms, the soft breeze of wind was from the air fans inside the hanger, the lighting overhead even provided the "heat" that the sun would in this particular setting. Inside they'd be hearing their boots clatter against the metallic floor paneling.

"_Shepard, move down to the starting point. I'd like to run through some quick drills to make sure they taught you the basics while they were teaching you to kill every living thing with a paper clip and slingshot._" The Captain said through the com.

"Sir," John moved down the lane to the side towards a table, on it were a standard issue MA6K and M6H Magnum. three spare magazines for both weapons.

The Misriah MA6K was based off the earlier MA5K Assault rifles issued to Special Forces. However, several changes had been implemented to increase its effectiveness. Since it wasn't a mass produced weapon like the MA5 series, the MA6K got some top of the line gear included in its construction. It fired 8.24x45mm Armor Piercing rounds from a 30 round magazine. Its design was bullpup, meaning the magazine was behind the trigger and bolt. The ejection port was near the front of the rifle. It also featured the standard "carrying" rail of the MA5K. Allowing the mounting of various optics. The barrel could be changed out for shorter or longer variants. Suppressors could also be mounted.

John picked it up, shouldered the weapon and then grabbed one of the Stun round magazines. Slid it into the feeder and with a click the weapon's systems activated. The ammo counter read 32. And the currently mounted 1x RedDot sight activated as well. That done, he attached the magazines to his waist via magnetic clamps. He pulled the bolt back, chambering a round. It was ready.

He grabbed the M6H, attaching that to his left hip after he loaded and cocked it. The magazines joined the others at his waist. He waited for instructions.

"_Right, Shepard. Now, before we begin the actual test, let's run a refresher course by you._" MacMillan's voice ran through the com.
"_First, shoulder your rifle._"

John did so, putting the butt of the rifle into his shoulder he lifted it up and polarized his visor. His HUD activated and the weapon's targeting reticule lit up, shifting with the slight sway of the weapon itself. He peered down into the red dot and the HUD shifted to a single red dot instead of half-an-inch wide circle.

"_You see that? Remember, you're an ODST now. Not a marine. You don't have the luxury of spraying everything down range with your reticule. Most of our guns are loaded with Red Dot sights or Scopes. All are smart linked_." MacMillan explained into his ear. "_Meaning you just incline your head a bit more and line your sight up with the scope or sight and your HUD changes accordingly. With the dot sight you have now, wherever that dot is, anything between you and ten meters out is getting shot with near pinpoint accuracy. Remember that when you think firing from the hip is a good idea_."

John frowned a bit, he knew all that. Smart linked weapons and HUDs had been around for awhile now and its technology was always being improved upon, but it was always the same in use. Weapons linked to HUD, gave the user a general location of where the rounds would be flying. Hence the targeting Reticule. Smart linked optics like scopes did the same thing, just for added accuracy.

"Understood, Captain." John said.

"_Now, when your out of ammo in a firefight and your position is being pressed, don't bother to reload if you know you don't got time_." MacMillan went on. "_Now for example. Switch to your M6._"

John released the grip of the MA6K and with one hand still on its forward hand guard pulled the rifle up and onto his back where he attached it to some magnetic clamp. At the same time his free hand reached down to his hip and gripped the M6H, bringing it up in time to meet his other hand to hold it properly. The HUD changed the targeting reticule accordingly. The handgun was more accuracy, now it a quarter of an inch circle.

"_See how fast that was compared to ejecting a mag and grabbing a new one_?" MacMillan asked, seeming satisfied. "_Always keep that in mind, Shepard. Switching to your sidearm is always faster than reloading, might just save your life someday_." A chuckle. "_Now, switch back to your rifle_."

John did so.

"_Good lad, there's an even faster method then switching to your sidearm in a pinch. Your ODST armor is equipped with a Hardlight blade above your left wrist. Make a fist and swing if as if for a punch_." A pause, "_Lean your first slightly downwards too, its set to training mode so it won't hurt the poor sods in the test area_."

John slammed his right fist forward, tilting his fist ever slightly downward and with a small "snap" the Hardlight blade, a soft blue. Was brought to life. At six and half inches. The blade was made of hardlight and was harder then conventional metal for its thin and sharp profile. Made from Forerunner tech, he didn't expect less from

it.

"_Perfect, right. Think I've wasted your time enough. Prepare to take the test. Remember, four minutes. You don't get that case in that time or you get killed, you can kiss ODST goodbye and its back to boot for you_." The Captain stated, sounding dead serious and John didn't doubt he was. "_As a side note, Gary holds the current squad record at one minute, fifteen seconds, you top his time. I'll buy the team a round_."

John smiled behind his visor. Rounds for the team if he passed this with a new time? Almost sounded worth the extra effort to impress his new team if he wanted to make a good first impression. _Alright, here I go. Time to show off what nine months of ODST boot does to a man._ He thought, cracking his neck and shouldering his rifle. And he waited for the signal by the door.

"_Go_!" The com crackled.

The doors parted. John sprinted forward, he came out left of the structure and two of the marines on patrol were just turning the corner to make their rounds. They spotted him, moving to raise their rifles.

John was faster. He fired off a pair of bursts, the rounds impacted their chests and knocked them to the ground, they were KIA. He turned forward, saw a window and with two more bursts as one of the marines inside the building peered through to check out the commotion, only to be greeted by the five rounds to the body. He fell back in a heap.

With a pump of his legs he pushed up and into the building itself, landing inside one of the smaller first floor rooms. He glanced around quickly, heard footsteps to the doorway on his right and he snapped his rifle up, firing two rounds as a marine cleared the corner. He was downed, a second volley took down the second.

Hearing another set of steps behind. John pushed forward out into the hall over the two "bodies" as the third patrolman from the hall stepped into the room behind him, firing off a prolonged burst of rounds which peppered the wall beside the doorway John just disappeared through.

In the Observational Post above the area. The rest of Delta-7 watched John's progress. "Kid's fast, I'll give him that." MacMillan said, crossing his arms and watching intently. "Accuracy is good too."

"Reaction time too," Marcus put in, nodding beside him.

The team watched as John stepped into the room across the hall from the first he entered from, one of the marines raised their rifle to fire, in the time it took him to register it was John in ODST armor, the Corporal fired a burst into his chest, knocking him down and moving up the stairwell, only to stop when two of the marines fired suppressing fire,

A third tossed a KP grenade down the stairs while his friends gave suppressing fire. John surprised the team by lashing his boot out and kicked the grenade back up the steps, he ducked as it detonated at

the top of the stairs. Splattering the three hostiles, clearing them.

"Hah!" Gary laughed, amused. "Now that's one return-to-sender I can appreciate."

"Its reckless." Jennifer waved her hand. "A number of things are wrong with that kind of move." As the teams designated Marksman, she was trained for precision.

"Nah," Gary said, shaking his head. "In that situation. He either _tried _something, or died. Not much place to hide from a grenade in those quarters." he pointed out. She had to agree with him there.

"What's his time?" MacMillan asked without looking away from the screen.

John moved up the stairs, diving out into the hall onto his side and firing at the two down the hall from his position, their opening bursts spraying the wall down to his position before he downed them, had he been standing they would have tagged him.

"Fifty-six seconds." Marcus replied simply.

"It's gonna be close," Gary grinned, crossing his arms now.

They watched as John moved over to the bodies, grabbed a pair of KP grenades and then took the brief case by the handle. He looked to the window, then to the grenades. He pulled their pins, tossed them into the hall and as they detonated, fired out the window and shattered it. Using the sounds of the dual detonation to mask the noise.

He jumped out of the second storey window, rifle in one hand, case in the other. Inside, the other marines scrabmled up the stairs to try and find him. He sprinted for the finish. He cleared it and the timer stopped.

"Time?"

Marcus chuckled. "One minute, four seconds." He turned to MacMillan. "Shepard's got talent."

Gary laughed, grinning behind his own visor. "I knew the kid could topple my record, he had that look in his eyes. Thatâ€¦ feeling, the drive to succeedâ€¦" he said, sounding wistful. "Kinda like me back in high school."

Jennifer held her peace, but the look in her posture said she was impressed as the rest of the team. Gerald, who had been silent the whole time merely nodded. It was official, John "Shepard" Price was joining Delta-7.

"Riley, go down and give Shepard the good news." Marcus said, patting his superior on the back and that earned him a small glare before MacMillan turned and proceeded down the stairway towards the finish point.

John was waiting for him, case on the table along with his remaining gear. When he spotted Macmillan he saluted. "Captain, sir!"

The Captain shook his head and held out his hand. "Drop the salute, you're part of my team now, Shepard." he said dismissively, just slightly aggressive. When John dropped the salute and after a bit of hesitation, reached out and took the Captain's hand. They shook and MacMillan said. "Welcome to Delta seven, Shepard." MacMillan unpolarized. "I expect great things from you."

"Captain," Shepard smiled behind his own, now unpolarized, visor. "I'll try not to disappoint."

"Good man, now, I think I owe you and the other some drinks."

"_Attention all UNSC personnel_." The intercom blared overhead, causing the ODSs to look upwards as the large viewing screen activated and showed the face of Admiral Terrance Hood. He was stern faced as he stared at the camera, and in doing so, the audience. "_As of two hours ago the UNSC committee came to a decision to activate and travel through the Prometheus Two Device with an exploratory fleet of five ships to check the next linked system for possible other garden worlds_." he explained. "_Heading up this small fleet is Captain Victor Wallace of the Destroyer _Far Away_, along with the Heavy Frigates _Massachusetts_, _Lancer_ and _Final Say_. And the Exploration Frigate _Eye of the Beholder_."

That was surprising. Well, after debating about it for three weeks they had to reach the decision sooner or later. So MacMillan wasn't that surprised. He looked to John, who was staring at the screen with rapt attention, likely because the _Far Away_ was the ship his mother was serving on. Probably hoping to see her before she jumped through, or after, during her shore leave.

"_The Exploration fleet will activate and travel through the Device at eighteen hundred hours tomorrow_." Hood nodded and the screen winked off.

"Well," The Captain said, looking at Shepard. "Guess the team gets to meet your mum."

"Yeah," Shepard may have shrugged, but his voice was noticeably brighter. "Guess so."

****End of Chapter Three****

****There it is, Chapter Three! And can you feeeel the buildup for Turian contact? CAN YOU?! I hope you can, I'm practically jabbing you all in the side with it! Anyways, You know the drill, comments, questions and concerns? Review or PM em! Also, big shoutout to Modern Warfare in this chapter. G'night/day!****

5. Chapter four

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Four****

****January 11, 2582. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC Destroyer-Class _Far Away**_**, Prometheus System.**

1700 Hours**.

>The Far Away was a new ship, having only stepped off the production line in 2574 and has since then only seen three combat scenarios in the outer colonies and for all three tours it had never once been damaged by the enemy. While the other Frigates and _Exploration_-Class ships within the small exploratory fleet were "outdated" in technological standards, since each one was a survivor of the Human-Covenant War. That didn't make them any less threatening while it was true they didn't get any of the newer toys that the _Far Away _did, the advances in technology brought on the Forerunner technology caches has allowed for vastly superior internal components such as computing systems refits, brand new Fusion-Reactors allowed faster recharging of the MAC cannons aboard the vessels, engine refits increased propulsion speed and as of 2575 all UNSC craft of Strident-Class Frigate or higher put into service after the year 2560 were all undergoing refits for these small, but welcomed benefits.

However, being a newer ship, the _Far Away_ was leagues ahead of the other older ships inside the UNSC fleet. At 722 Meters in length, 440 in width and 478 meters tall. It was a big ship by Destroyer standards. It was also state-of-the-art. While most UNSC ships loaded with Forerunner or refined Covenant tech were just upgraded, the Far Away was made from the stuff. The ship was second only to _Infinity_-Class Cruisers _Infinity_ and _Daedalus_ in the "most advanced ship" award. And even then, the _Far Away_ could probably give the "trial" ship _Infinity_ a run for its money.

While other UNSC ships sported a dull-gray metallic hue on the hull due to the Titanium-A battle plating armor. The _Far Away_ was lighter grey, almost white. It was also fast, using Forerunner based propulsion drives and four smaller drives. It was also powered by two XR2-M BF Reactors, the XR2-M's were like the ones used on the _Infinity_-Class cruisers, albeit smaller. Just one of these cores provided the ship with energy to propulsion,. Life support, Slipspace transitions. The second Reactor was purely for the offensive and defensive measures that the Far Away had at her disposal.

Unlike other UNSC ships which were equipped with one or two MAC guns that were build along or most of the ship itself. The _Far Away_ was mounted with a FPP, Forward Particle Projector. The weapon ran a good 50 meters from the front of the ship inwards and was connected to the second drive core. The FPP was unlike any weapon used by the UNSC or Covenant at any stage for the last hundred years. If anyone was asked what the weapon was like, they would say that the weapon was "Spartan Laser" enlarged several hundred times and mounted on a ship. Which it was, based off Forerunner Particle AA guns the weapon built up a massive charge in the "chamber" and then fired it at light speed with pinpoint accuracy.

It was the perfect ship-to-ship weapon. The second Reactor made sure its charging speed was on par with most MAC guns, it was faster than Plasma and more accurate.

That wasn't the only thing that made the _Far Away_ lethal in space. It was also mounted with four smaller "MAC" cannons along the sides of the ship for "strafing" runs against other ships during close fights. Along with five dozen twin-barrel 60mm Point-Defense guns along the hull and six heavy salvo ports for missile deployment.

For defense. The Destroyer was gifted with 2.5 meters of Titanium-AF plating, a material based again off Forerunner design providing the same protection properties of 5 meters of Titanium A plating for half the weight. But the most impressive defense _Far Away_ possessed was the RHLB defense grid.

Reactive Hard-Light Barrier defense grids were newly developed emitters that were installed across the outer hull and created a "web" along the ship. Over three hundred of these emitters were scattered across the hull of the ship to provide the best protective blanket possible. RHLB grids were the first line of defense and, for lack of a better word, impenetrable to all matters of attack. In essence, the grid reacted to threats coming at the ship, such as plasma torpedoes or missiles. It would track the trajectory of those incoming objects and with help from a shipboard Dumb-AI designed specially for that task, produce a "wall" of hard-light at the points impact moments before they did impact, similar to how Sentinel shields "snapped" into place when objects of certain weight and velocity were fired at them.

Hard-Light was impenetrable or damn close to it, plasma splashed off it, it deflected or outright stopped MAC rounds and missiles may as well have been suicide runners. They were also EMP shielded which meant even nuclear detonation wouldn't knock them out.

The only downside was that they were damn energy drainers.

The second Reactor, while yes was used to power the offensive and defensive options, was installed mainly because of the large amount of power that the RHLB grid took up during operation. Between powering the engines, FPP and RHLB along with the other needed systems on the _Far Away_. You needed two reactors to make it all work efficiently otherwise the FPP would recharge much slower than a MAC between shots and even slower when the RHLB grid was active and deflecting blows.

A marvel and only one of seventy-eight in operation so far within the UNSC due to its High cost to build along with time to actually build the ship itself. However the Shipyards on Mars were currently working on another seven, along with four other new shipping yards across the Inner colonies. Each was also under heavy security, while the Insurrection wasn't nearly as strong as it had once been, they were still bold enough to try and steal UNSC ships. All in all, the _Far Away_ was like the Infinity of its current time.

And in Maria Price's thirteen years of service, the best ship she had ever served on. Maria Price was an Junior Grade Lieutenant and in charge of Communications on the Far Away, pushing forty-five she was still striking, fiery red hair cut at the perfect regulation length, uniform always in top shape and she was good at her job. A top grade Officer.

And that was a curse, for her good pay her hours for shore leave to be with her husband and son was almost non-existent year around and during tours in the outer colonies she couldn't even send a vid mail home. This was made worse by the fact her husband was a spook, a fact she disapproved off whenever they spoke, and her son was, last she heard from him, running through the ODST selection process to become a trooper.

Her family, despite its broad skills and fields, would never be whole again it seemed, not until they all retired or were somehow assigned to the same ship. It had been a full year since they all been together, for three days they had managed to make the most of it on Earth, enjoying five-star treatment and the simpler things. It may have been three days, but they were the best she had in her life.

She passed by some of her colleagues, giving them a brief salute and smile she continued on towards the bridge. Beside her, many others were moving to their stations to travel through the Prometheus 2 Device and see what awaited them on the other side. Since the first time had lead them to a garden world, the UNSC was also using this as a chance to showoff their advanced new ship.

She guessed that was why the Far Away had been pulled from the Earth Defense Fleet and was sent out here in a hurry, anyway.

A quick lift right up two decks and two halls later she arrived on the bridge where Captain Victor Wallace was waiting on his command chair, he was middle aged man, well mannered and a capable Captain. In her eyes he was a fine Captain to serve under. His hair was graying around the edges and sometimes his eyes looked tired, but he had been an ensign and like her had been a coms Officer on a ship during the war, she imagined seeing planets get glassed does that to a person.

But he was always smiling anyways, setting a cheery example for his crew. Some tried to be lax about it, but he was also quick to chomp down on slacking.

"Junior Lieutenant Price," Maria presented herself to him, snapping off a salute and standing at attention. "Reporting, Captain." He kept a hard look at her, and she restrained the urge to smile knowing this was an act on his part. He loved to play the "always stern, tired Captain" act every time his officers reported formally to him instead of just taking their stations.

His stern look stayed a moment, then the corners of his lips twitched and he smiled. "At ease, Junior Lieutenant Price," he saluted back. "Man your station and get me a link to the rest of the fleet, ask them if they're ready for the operation."

"Sir," Maria smiled, turned and took her station. She logged into her console and her fingers danced over the keys with practiced and perfected speed. Thirteen years of service and one year of training did that to a person. Soon enough, she received replies from the other ships in the small fleet, all were green to go.

"We're green from the Lancer, Massachusetts," she reported. "The Final Say and Eye of the Beholder are also green. Just waiting on the go word from us, Captain."

"Good," Wallace nodded from his command chair, looking at the list of ships and the overhead countdown timer to the Operation. So far, only forty-minutes until they began.

Maria had to admit, she was excited to see what was on the other side. A part of her hoped it was friendly intelligent life. If it was, perhaps they could finally begin to expand on their new purpose

to other species as well, maybe one day they would find a species, much like ancient humans, squatting in the mud, primitive and lost in war and strife. Then, like the Jiralhanae back in Forerunner space, begin the uplifting process and aid them on the path to peaceful advancement.

She closed her eyes and imagined it. A new species, standing beside humanity, hand in the air as they together with the other species of the galaxy basked in the shadow of the Mantle of Humanity's responsibility to the life of the universe as caretakers, ensuring the universe was gifted with life across its stars and to teach them to cherish each and those who shared in their existence.

Such was Humanity's Mantle as she believed it to be. The Forerunners before them had been enforcers of the Mantle, they collected and indexed entire species in the final days of their desperate war against the parasitic flood. And in their last moments, blessed humanities ancestors with the final sacred duty of upholding the mantle in their stead.

Then, they had fired the Halo Array wiping all life from Forerunner space and starving the flood. And in the wake of the floods extinction, reseeded the now empty, fertile planets with their old life forms. Effectively destroying and reviving the galaxy to give it a new hope without fear of the Flood.

Maria smiled, she always liked that story, she told it to her son and husband many a times when they were together. Her husband wasn't a believer in the Mantle, she didn't begrudge him that, she understood it was hard for him to accept it, she didn't push it onto him or her boy, she just told them to "keep an open mind" once in awhile.

"Maria, quit yer daydreamin' and listen! It's Admiral Hood making a public statement!" Her colleague and close friend Jessica Helens on Operations hissed beside her, snapping her from her religious daydreaming.

Maria looked up, "Sorry, Jess." she said, then looked to the main screen on the Bridge and saw Admiral Terrance Hood standing on a stage before a podium, several other naval personnel at his side. It was another announcement to the public concerning the operation that would begin in thirty minutes now.

"_Ladies and gentlemen_," Hood began, leaning down slightly, he was more aged on screen than in person. But still had the same commanding aura he had lead fleets against the Covenant with. "_Citizens of Earth and all her colonies. Today we embark on yet another journey across unknown space into unknown territory in the hopes of discovering new life and planets to help spread not only our influence as Humanity, but also the influence of our allies_." Hood's gaze travelled over the various reporters.

"Is he broadcasting across UNSC space?" Jess whispered to Maria, eyes fixed on the screen.

Maria shook her head slightly. "No, I think he's broadcasting across Sangheili, UNSC and Kig-Yar space" she was surprised, the only time the UNSC has ever made a galaxy wide news broadcast that reached Sanghelios and Eayn was to announce that trading agreements had been

met and that all three species wished for a prosperous outcome to this action.

She wondered what this was about then.

Hood spoke again. "_When we began to colonize the newly named Prometheus System, the committee met and agreed that once the colony was established, the other two worlds would be terraformed and offered to our allies, the Sangheili and Kig-Yar_." The reporter before him began to clamber to ask him questions, he raised his hand and they quieted. "_Your questions will be answered by myself shortly, but first. Let us wish the crews of the exploration fleet our best and pray when they return it is with glad tidings._"

"_To Humanity's expansion_â€|" Hood said, standing tall now. "_And all her allies_."

Maria smiled. _And to all life as well, Hood_. She thought.

Twenty-minute marker hit. Maria and the other officers were ordered to focus up and get the ship into final test runs to check for any problems, which were to be reported ASAP. Maria set to work checking the communications antennae, systems and running the various test phases. When they all turned up green, she reported it to the Captain.

"Very good," Wallace nodded at the report, scrolling across the various others being forwarded it to his personal tablet. "Alright. We're ready to get this show on the road." he looked up at the timer. Ten minutes to go. "Alright, get me a line the other ships in the fleet."

"Yes, Captain," Maria typed quickly. "Link up now, sir. You're on the air."

"Attention Exploratory fleet," Wallace said when the faces of the ship Captains appeared on the forward viewer. "Get ready for the jump. What I heard these things play hell with our gear for a few moments, so communications might be down for awhile when we jump." he paused, then added. "Commander Massey, you got the honor of activating the first Device. I want you right on my tail when the Far Away goes through. The rest of you fall in formational order through as well. Once through, I want a quick patrol of the next system. Clear?"

The other Captains confirmed the orders.

"Good, UNSC has got this whole event built up like a party too, so, lets try to make it back without any scratched paint, eh, Massey?" he grinned this time at the Commander of the _Eye of the Beholder_.

Massey, to his credit, just scowled and offered a curt. "_Yes, Captain_."

That jab out of the way, the crew waited for the counter to hit zero and so they could begin the operation. At the five minute marker there were a half dozen civilians shuttles outside, likely news crews and civilians eager to see the spectacle since the first time had

been a more private affair. After the events of the First Contact with the Covenant, more than a few people were eager to embrace peaceful expansion rather than hesitant "watch those corners" mentality the UNSC in the following decade of the war's end.

"I feel like we should be holding streamers or somethin'," Jessica said from her station, earning a light hearted chuckle from the other officers. "What? Its like counting down to a new year, or a birthday party."

"It kinda is a birthday party, lot of people gathering to celebrate an event, or birth, of a new discovery and all its possibilities." Mara said, nodding sagely as if she were an old wizard.

"Two minute mark." Wallace said, "Helm. Move us up to hailing distance of the Device, prepare the same counter-response the _Eye of the Beholder_'s Pelican used." he said, putting on his Captain's face and sitting straight up in his chair. He tapped his tablet and began to recount the whole event on a voice recording that would be beamed back to the Shanxi colony when they made it across. Just a formality for the press.

"One minute marker. Launching a hail to the device once within com range." He said, looking ahead at the inactive device. Its blue pulsing core getting brighter as they neared the com channels began to broadcast static, a sign the thing was trying to establish a link. Just as the Pelican from the Eye of the Beholder had reported. "Device has hailed all channels. Responding now."

He nodded to Maria.

She didn't nod back, instead she responded on all channels the message the pilot had used to activate the first device. And over their heads, the message played.

"_Please don't vaporize us_."

Maria almost laughed, that was the message the pilot sent? Oh Forerunners that was hilarious! She smiled instead, Jessica snorted and Jack at Navigations chuckled. Only Wallace kept his serious face on and kept his eyes on the Device.

It pulsed once more and the channels cleared. Then, the core pulsed three times more rapidly before the three rings around it began to spin in opposing directions. The pulsing increased, then faded back to normal levels. Energy spikes registered on their sensors from the device, which then levelled out again.

"Device is active." Wallace said to the tablet. "Helm, increase speed by five percent, move us into jump distance of it."

"Aye, Captain." Jack said and moved the ship faster towards the device. They all watched it get closer, soon it was dwarfing the _Far Away_ as they neared the energy core. The countdown timer read ten seconds,

"Ten seconds," Wallace said without looking at the timer. "Nine."

"Eight" Jessica added, serious voiced with excited undertones.

"Seven."

"Six," Maria picked it up, trying to keep her own expression serious to mask her own elation. "Five."

"Four," Jack now, cracking his neck. "Three."

"Two" Wallace finished. "One."

Bolts of electricity shot from the objects core, impacting the hull of the _Far Away _and as predicted, the systems were bugging out, though not by much if at all. It was noticeable, but hardly a hindrance. Soon, the glow surrounding their ship intensified, the stars turned to blurred streaks and the galaxy dissolved into a mass blur of motion-

And then they decelerated a mere moment later in another system.

"Systems report," Captain Wallace said, looking over his crew briefly before moving his eyes out to the space before them.

"It's official, Captain," Jack at Navigations spoke up. "We're in unknown space. Local scans don't put us anywhere in known space." he looked up, "We're green, sir."

"Communication systems all check out, we are out of range of any com probes long range sensors don't detect any local channels." Maria spoke up, performing her own systems check quickly, they still had a job afterall.

"Weapons systems are green as well."

"Operations' green," Jessica smiled from her seat. "Well, we weren't be vaporized, that's for sure."

The bridge crew laughed a little at that one, even Wallace got a grin out of it. "Good, inform me when the others make the jump as well, remember, these things have a drift effect so we might need to make some fast adjustments, most us away from the device." he ordered now.

"Aye, Captain."

The _Far Away _accelerated away from the Device. A half minute later the _Eye of the Beholder _appeared in the same jump area, its engines flared and it too accelerated to a safe distance and took to the right side of the _Far Away_ to get into formation. They reported green as well. Then came the _Massachusetts_, followed by the _Lancer_ and _Final Say _after that. All ships reported green.

"Good," Wallace smiled from his chair. "Now, lets move people. We're going to take a small stroll around the system, make a pass by every planet and get a reading on atmosphere, read out any notable stars or moons." he said, turning serious again. "Science boys are going to want to name this system too, may as well do a quick survey while we have our two hour window."

"Also, prepare the messenger bird." Wallace added to Maria. "Transmit

my recording to the pilots external tablet, he can take it back through the jump and they can play it over and over for five hours until everyone is sick of my voice." he grinned.

"Aye, Captain." Maria took, rolling her eyes and contacted the pilot. "Messenger bird. I'm forwarding you an audio file. Ensure it gets back to Shanxi." she said into the com. "And double time it, we're about to take off for a quick recon around the planets in-system."

"_Got it, Lieutenant,_ " crackled the com. "_I'm off in one minute. Safe flying out there_."

"You too, communications out." Maria leaned back in her seat. They had successfully jumped and so far all was going according to plan, now they would simply drive around the system and scan the planets and moons to get a quick reading to let the science labs aboard the _Eye_ to think over while completed their brief tour for report back at Shanxi.

The formation accelerated, and soon the first planet was in sight. A desolate looking one by the looks of it, surface looked like a mixture of sand yellow with soft patches of red. She didn't know what it was, but she was sure the soft patches were giant storm clouds visible from their extreme distance. It had two moons as well, varying in size.

"I'm getting some weird readings from the scanners, Captain." Operations reported, frowning a bit. "Unknown energy emissions, low levels of itâ€¦nothing to suggest a ship, but its there."

Wallace sat up straighter in his chair and his relaxed posture disappeared, replaced by the professionalism of a UNSC Navy Captain from the war. "Location of these readings?" he asked.

"Multiple directions, I think the energy is a bleeding effect from the Device, when we used it the energy field that enveloped us must be sticking to us, throwing off sensor readings." Operations suggested, typing away. "Going to check with the others and see if they're receiving similar readings," Jessica looked over to the Captain. "With your permission, Captain."

"Granted." Wallace nodded and moved his gaze back to the planet. One of the moons on the right was greyish black, they'd be passing it soon enough. They entered its shadow shortly when Jessica reported that the other ships were getting similar sensor readings. Most of the crew agreed it was just some sort of bleeding effect from the other ships. "Alright, lets keep going then. Once we clear the dark of the moon we'll make a quick jump to Slipspace to make it to the next planet over since it's a fair distance away."

"Aye, Captain." Navigations replied and got to work setting the jump coordinates and began the charging phase for the Slipspace engine.

"Lieutenant Price, inform the others that we'll be jumping to Slipspace and that they should follow us through, same them some time."

"On it, sir." Maria replied, connecting lines to the other four

ships. "Attention, exploratory fleet. We are preparing to make a slipspace jump to the next planet over as soon as we leave the shadow of the moon. Captains orders are to follow us through, understood?"

A series of affirmatives and they were good.

The formation continued along and as they were leaving the shadow of the moon they were passing. The Frigate _Final Say_ reported power burst on the sensor, again with the unknown source of energy.

Then the middle of the right side hull exploded in a brilliant flash of shredded Titanium-A battle plate and the ships superstructure warped around the impact wound, the impact itself drove the ship to the left and it rammed bow first into the _Lancer_'s right side engine. The _Final Say_'s bow bent and crumbled as the superstructure gave way to the forces of impacting the other ship. But not before crippling said ships engine and causing hull breaches across several of the decks.

"Sir! Weapons impact on the _Final Say_!" Maria reported in alarm, sitting up and working over the keys. "She's reporting large hull breaches at the impact sight! The force of the shot also caused her to ram the _Lancer_ nose first!" she reported quickly, taking a breath and switching into her own professional form. "_Lancer_'s right engine is damaged and offline. As id the _Final Say_'s MAC gun."

Wallace didn't stand up in alarm, exclaim in surprise or show any form of surprise side the narrowing of his eyes. But he did fire out the orders, "Operations! Get me a line on where that shot was fired from!" he said. "And have the ships loosen the formation! Go to full combat readiness!"

"Aye, sir." Jessica whispered.

Klaxons blared.

Across the ship, marines got to their armories, suited up into their armor and loaded up their weapons. The Hanger bays got busy prepping the fighters to launch in case they were needed. And Maria? She felt fear and disappointment grip her chest. They had been fired upon, which meant intelligent life—| hostile, intelligent life.

"Weapon safeties are off," Operations reported.

"Heat spike!" Jack called. "Multiple now! Counting at least seven bursts! Heat emissions—| they're coming in from up below the moon!"

"Get me a visual, Now!"

The forward screen winked on and showed the shadowed forms of seven vessels moving in an attack formation, the largest was at rear of the tight V formation. Their hulls were a mixture of white, blue and grey in color and each was mounted with what appeared to be forward mounted guns on their bows. And they were speeding towards the fleets exposed right side from downward angle.

If Wallace had to guess it was the largest vessel that had fired the

first shot and had intentionally wanted the Final Say to crash into its sister ship. Whoever was Captain of that ship was a smart bastard. And soon a dead one.

"They're firing!"

"Evade!" Wallace barked.

"Not at us, sir!" Jack's eyes widened. "They're targeting the _Lancer_ and _Final Say_!"

Maria's eyes widened. With the damage to the engine for the _Lancer_ and the damage from the first shot to the _Final Say_ "They won't be able to dodge." she whispered.

The seven rounds from the new hostile fleet moved towards the UNSC fleet formation in a pointed arrowhead like formation, the two targeted ships engines flare to try and accelerate out of the way. The _Final Say_ arched upwards to try and dodge the four rounds aimed at it

And too slow as the three of four of the rounds impacted its right side. The ship buckled at each blow that sent even more pieces of its outer hull outwards, one of the rounds impacted near the first's impact site, the already weakened structure beneath the hull gave way like withered drywood to a hammer strike.

The _Final Say_ bent at the middle, its left side strained then the round punched through with a splash of metal fragment and atmosphere. Bleeding, the engines sputtered and it began to drift slightly, its engines glowed a moment later as if to accelerate.

Then its hull bent outwards and flames engulfed the entirety of it.

The _Lancer_ took two of the four intended rounds to its already damaged engine, while the other two had missed.

The _Lancer_'s engine flared blue, then white and with a brilliant, but brief flash of fire the engine exploded with enough force to send the Frigate into a tumble, its second and main engines sputtering to try and counter their spin.

The _Massachusetts_ broke formation, speeding ahead turning to try and face the enemy. It let loose a salvo of Archer missiles as it turned.

Wallace barked out. "Activate the XL-10s! Bring us hard to port!" They were going to strafe those ships with the MAC turrets mounted along the port side of their hull. "Order the _Eye of the Beholder_ to fall back towards the Device and jump back through to Shanxi!"

"Sir!" Maria got to it while the others followed their own orders. "They acknowledge and are breaking off now, Captain!"

"Good," Wallace muttered. "Now lets teach these bastards a lesson about how to play hard ball."

The _Far Away_ turned and moved downward, they were visible on the main viewing screen as the Archer missile salvo closed in on the enemy formation. And they watched as the enemy vessels used pinpoint laser shots to fire down the closing missiles, but not all, more than half made it through and struck the shipsâ€¦

Or rather, their protective barriers. The surface flickered and through the plumes of fire the vessel sped by the _Massachusetts_ on both sides, the forward ships letting loose more laser shots at near point-blank range. Along with a salvo of what appeared to be plasma torpedoes? Whatever they were, they washed across the hull of the _Final Say_, leaving blackened holes where they struck while the pulse lasers left melted lines that crissed and crossed.

Venting atmosphere on both sides the ship pulled up as the larger lined up a shot. And fired once before turning off to avoid a full on collision with the Frigate. The round that it had fired slammed into the belly of the ship, sheared through the armor and into the ship itself and sending it into a tumble similar to the _Lancer_.

The enemy formation continued to move, veering left to try and stay out of the way of the _Far Away_'s obvious forward cannon. The craft were nimble, even the larger ship, while noticeably slower, was still able to move in a loose V formation with the rest of them. Like a pack of wolves working to ambush their prey.

"Not that'll help them," Wallace whispered, noting the Tac Map. The enemy formation broke into two pairs, three veering left, the Corvette sized vessels increased their speed and flew straight for the injured _Lancer_ who was just now getting its tumble under control. "Fire salvos one through five, target the three ships headed for the _Lancer_!"

A series of hollow thumps sounded out as the missiles launched and flew towards the three ships on an intercept course.

"Get me a firing solution on the other four! Load the XL-10s!"

"Sir, making it happen!" Jessica's fingers moved with controlled speed, obviously trying not to make a mistake.

Maria watched as the four vessels continued to turn until it became clear they were trying to line their main guns up for strafing run on the _Far Away_ like they did with the _Massachusetts_ moments ago and again the largest craft took up the rear of the formation while the smaller ones sped ahead.

"Target the forward hostiles! Don't waste rounds on the larger one. I want the faster ships down!" the Captain called.

"Sir, lock on the forward vessels. We're green to fire!"

"Fire!"

The _Far Away_'s XL-10 MAC mini-MACs opened fire. The four dual pronged turrets, each the size of a Covenant Spirit transport ship, fired a Tungsten round at high velocity using magnetic force to deliver near unmatched speed and power compared to conventional weapons. Nothing short of the Forward Particle Projector could match

the speed of the rounds, well, that and whatever the enemy was using.

The four rounds streaked through space towards the closing craft, which lifted up to try and dodge the rounds. But at the velocity the rounds were going combined with the fact the enemy was rushing their side left them little options.

Four for four. All the rounds found their targets. One of the craft took one to the bow, its shielding failed and the round slammed into its nose, warping the forward structure and sending it nose up, exposing its belly to the second round and without its shields to soften the blow the MAC round punched it through and in half.

It was gone in a show of fire and molten metal a moment later.

Another took a round to its wing, the round bouncing off its shields due to the angle it had turned. The last of the three forward craft took a round the rear of their top hull, like the first ship, its shields held a blink before giving way and letting the round slam into its back where its engines were likely located as well.

It too exploded. Two of three kills achieved with one volley.

The missile salvo reached the three craft headed for the Lancer. Again their pulse lasers and shields made short work of the salvo, and the crew of the Far Away watched in helplessness as the Lancer was strafed by the enemy craft, pinpoint beams cutting across the hull and a single round to the midsection of the ship where the armor had been weakened by a pair of the plasma torpedo look-a-likes.

Reactor breached. The ship became a small star and when the light died, nothing was left but a debris field and the bodies of the Lancer's seven hundred personnel.

The three enemy craft turned upwards and began to move in a loop that would bring them in a downward angle towards the Far Away while the surviving craft from the wave that tried to strafe the Destroyer rejoined the larger ship. The pair fired at the Far Away at range with their main guns.

"Evade those shots! Track the closing vessels and roll us over!" Wallace commanded as he gripped the armrests of his chair. Eyes furious, posture tense and teeth almost grit in a snarl. Everyone could feel the anger rolling off the Captain, but it wasn't blind anger, it was focused. Ferocious. "Reload the XL-10s and when we have a lock, open fire on the approaching craft! And fire the remaining Archer missiles at the long range targets!"

The bridge crew confirmed the orders, working to fulfill them. Maria frowned, noting the way the ships flew and then they fired a salvo of their own torpedoes, the bright blue streaks moving towards them while the ships continued their loop.

The cloud of missiles streaked towards the Cruiser sized vessel and the single small craft at its side. They accelerated forward towards it, confident in their shields to take the brunt of the damage. And when the missiles detonated against their shields and they flew

through the resulting flames, their confidence was well founded. The shields they were using made short work of missiles.

"Let's see how they like Nuclear missiles then," Wallace grunted. "Arm one SHIVA-class warhead and fire it on low burn, have it drift on their projected path and set detonation controls to my tablet!"

"Understood, sir!" Jessica nodded, biting her lip. "Missile away, Captain!"

"Captain!" Jack called from his seat. "Enemy craft have released another volley of their missiles! Impact in twelve seconds!"

"Evade them!"

The first pair of missiles streaked towards the Far Away, the ship pushed its engines to full and with a jump of speed the pair missed—the second turned to trail the Destroyer while the Cruiser and Corvette fired again from long range with their main gun. Forcing the Destroyer to alter its course again, clean misses for the shots.

The missiles however would hit. The ship's RHLB grid snapped into place and the blue Hard-Light surfaces formed a protective wall between the ship and the missiles. They impacted and the Hard-Light shielding distorted, sputtered and then faded, their job done.

The Cruiser and Corvette pair turned to try and line up another shot while the looping three hostiles ending their dance by moving to the right side of the Far Away. Pincering the ship between their two formations.

"Burn, you bastards." Wallace said, then pressed the detonation key on his tablet.

A bright flash of light appeared between the Cruiser and Corvette, their shields died in an instant, their hulls boiled away as did the superstructure beneath it, and with a final explosion the nuke detonated, followed by two more as the pair of crafts own reactors went with them.

The last three ships broke off and veered away at speeds too fast for the Destroyer to catch them in the time it would take to turn and go after them at their current distance. But for now, he could only assume they were retreating with the destruction of their Cruiser.

Wallace sat back, watching the craft disappear as they flew further away. The Lancer and Final Say were gone, all hands likely lost, well over one-thousand personnel. And the Massachusetts wouldn't be making it back to Shanxi without a helping hand.

The only ship to come out of this unscathed was the Eye of the Beholder which had hopefully made the jump back to Shanxi. "Contact the Massachusetts. Tell them to prepare their people to come aboard the Far Away and to scuttle the ship after enacting the Cole Protocol of wiping all relevant data from their data stores." he said, tone curt while he raised a hand to his temples and massaged them.

"Sir? We're not towing them?" Maria asked.

"We don't know what making a jump in the device will do to that damaged ship. And we sure as hell aren't risking a Slipspace jump either." Wallace replied bitterly. "Send the message."

"Aye, Captain." Maris whispered.

"Time to deliver the _wonderful_ newsâ€|" he said, "First contact was a mess, _again._"

Maria stared sadly at the monitor of the retreating vessels. Why had they opened fire? Why hadn't they tried to hail their ships before attacking to try and reach a peaceful solution? These questions swam through her mind. She was sad either side had to suffer losses and now Humanity would have an enemy in the form of these species.

To Maria, it was just another bump on Humanity's road to upholding the Mantle of Responsibility.

****End of Chapter Four****

_**Well, there's Chapter Four. All 6000+ words of it! Now, this is it, the start of it all. Turians VS Humanity, the First Contact Warâ€| least with the Turians and Humans. You've also been given a glance into the newer ships that the UNSC has at its disposal, broken? You bet. Don't even get me started on Infinity-Class
Daedalus****. **_

**But, onto another subject which I think you may all be curious about. The idea of the Mantle of Responsibility influence on Humanity. Essentially during the Didact War in 2557-2560 the information attained from the Librarian, along with the Janus Key, which would lead Humanity to every piece of known Forerunner tech across Forerunner space. While much of it was kept secret from the public, information leaks in 2563 spread through the inner colonies. Files pertaining to the Librarian and John-117's encounter with the Didact, who was quoted as saying "Then Humanity has not yet attained the Mantleâ€| your Ascendance may yet be prevented."**

**This would give birth to an almost religious following of the Human population that Humanity had been chosen by the Forerunners to take up their past Mantle as caretakers of the galaxy, spawning debates and entire factions across the inner, and a year later, outer colonies as many others embraced the idea of being chosen by this super advanced race who had nobly sacrificed themselves to stop the flood before reseeding the galaxy with life, but before doing that, had decided to pass their Mantle onto Humanity.**

_**Many who believed in the Mantle of Responsibility began to push for the betterment of Humanity as a whole, fairer treatment of other species and understanding for their Forerunner forefathers. By the year of 2579 the following of the Mantle was so large it has a hold in almost every planet and organization. Some going as far as to write poetry about it. The basic understanding of the idea is that Humanity must set aside greed and discrimination in favor of understanding so they may use the gifts left to them by the Forerunners to help the other species of the galaxy, not just their allies, but all intelligent life to betterment. Such thoughts and sympathies were what birthed the Jiralhanae rehabilitation program

and allowed the Kig-Yar and Sangheili trading hubs to flourish as they did.**_

**The Influence of the information leaked was so great, that even former Covenant species such as Sangheili, who revered the Forerunners as Gods, began to accept that Humanity was chosen by their Gods to succeed them, and so some Sangheili see the humans as "God Children" and do their most to aid the humans to transcendence, believing that aiding them will better themselves in the eyes of the Gods. Sangheili represent the largest of this movement with few other species becoming enthralled with it.**

**And there you have it, a brief explanation on the Mantle of Responsibility's influence on Human and galactic society.**

6. Chapter five

In Infinitum: First Contact

Chapter Five

**January 12, 2582. Military Calendar.

>UNSC Central Command Station _**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 0700 Hours.

>"So," Fleet Admiral Leonardo Petrov said from his place inside the committee room aboard the station Atlas. "Who wants to be the first to open up this can of worms?"

In less than four days he was back in here discussing something he wished he wouldn't have to. It was the topic of new worlds discovered, what to name a new colony or system. What color cocoa beans he wanted to make available to officers across the fleet.

He was here to discuss the topic of Hostile Alien contact which had resulted in the destruction of two Frigates, the scuttling of the last and since the cameras had been rolling when the _Eye of the Beholder _returned, followed by the _Far Away _with the crew of the _Massachusetts_ seated inside its hangers and barracks after their ship had been wiped and destroyed via timed detonation of its Fusion Reactor.

When they returned, the UNSC had quickly responded to the possible threat by deploying a staggering eighty-nine ships to the Prometheus 2 Device and kept their fingers on the trigger in case whatever species those unknown ships belonged too came after the _Far Away _looking for a rematch. The Prometheus has been locked down and Sol and the surrounding systems were at Battle stations, waiting for the first sign of trouble and the chance to blow it to dust.

But now, this meeting was being held to discuss options and talk about their new enemy.

One of the civilians spoke up, offering a suggestion. "Perhaps it was a misunderstanding? These unknowns might have mistaken our fleet for an invasion force." he said, looking them over, the brass found that unlikely, very unlikely.

Sharon, one of the other civilians, spoke. "If they did, perhaps we should send out a smaller craft, attempt to find them and offer

peaceful negotiations?" she looked them over. "If we march to war so quickly, we'd be setting a bad example for our allies to follow. We cannot be quick to take up arms and take to the fields of battle. It will only lead to more ruin."

Hood frowned. "With all due respect, we aren't taking up arms, we're grabbing shields. They fired first, and with obvious lethal intent as the eleven hundred, thirty-five personnel of the Final Say and Lancer can attest to— if they could." he said, looking to Leonardo, who had been quiet so far. "The people don't want another war, but we've been fired upon again. Old habits are being resparked."

"Doesn't help that the only two ships who returned were being broadcast to every colony we have," another civilian muttered.

Sharon frowned slightly, looking at them all before sighing. "It is a tragedy, but such hardships have to be expected when we travel out in search of other planets and life." she began, "We shouldn—"

"Sharon, The Mantle isn't a religion nor is it a decree that Humanity should stand by and do nothing when we're attacked unprovoked." Micheal said from his chair, McCarthy at his side, looking like Micheal had just spoken the most taboo of words. He may as well have, considering the looks some of the civilians and two of the brass were giving him. He continued anyways. "We were attacked, we have to retaliate. Negotiation can come after the enemy has surrendered."

"So we're to become the Covenant to this new race?" Sharon bit back, glaring at him.

That sparked more than a few risings from the assembled committee, Hood watched as glares were thrown and insults were about to be flung.

"Enough!"

The room quieted again and everyone glanced towards the glaring fleet admiral, who's voice had raised over the ensuing arguments and half the room look as if they had been struck across the face. Hood didn't blame them, most didn't know Leonardo like he did and had never seen him angry.

Nor did they know his lack of patience for pointless bickering.

"Sharon," He said, giving said woman a small bow of his head. "My fellow committee members," he addressed them all now, standing and with arms behind his back marched to the center of the room. He passed his eyes over each of them once, then said. "I appreciate all of your input, your advices have been instrumental to the UNSC for the last three decades since the war. But!" he narrowed his eyes.

"Ultimately, any action that is to be taken by the UNSC concerning the following events falls to me and me alone," he strolled in a semi circle, continuing to speak. "We will seek peace. But not before we've bloodied our newer foes noses first." Sharon made to speak, he

held up his hand and she stopped. "The Mantle was be upheld. Compassion, however, cannot be tainted by inaction. They have spilled our blood and us theirs." he sighed. "I will not seek peace right out of the gate and appear to this new species as submissive. Humanity will not appear weak."

"A show of force," Micheal whispered from his spot, watching the Fleet Admiral closely. He was going to use a show of force to cow these unknowns, show them Humanity wouldn't take a hit and back down before they took a shot.

"The twenty-eighth battle group is currently parked outside the Device waiting for an enemy to present itself. This will not do," Leonardo went on, stopping his walk and facing the entirety of the committee. "We are going to battle, we will find the enemies base of Operations and then we will occupy it and repel all offensive attempts against us." He declared. "Only then will we offer them peace."

"That's all fine in theory, Fleet Admiral," One of the civilians spoke, applauding lowly. "But how are we supposed to find them? We'd have to wait for them to attack again to follow their ships back, by then it would be moot since they'd have attacked. So, how do we intend to strike first?"

Leonardo fixed the man with a level stare before smirking slightly. "Fair points. That is why shortly after the return of the Far Away, the Prowler Unseen Dagger was dispatched to the combat zone and following the retreating crafts course and launched several long range ping scans." he informed them.

"But travel past the Prometheus 2 Device was prohibited until we agreed on a solution," Sharon said, frowning in discontent at the Fleet Admiral, looking like she wanted to say something else. "What's a Prowler doing out there?"

"It's not out there," Leonardo replied simply, no warning necessary to enforce this was not to leave the meeting room. "Majestic, please bring up the report you prepared for us, please." he said, looking to the ceiling and standing aside to let the AI take the stage.

"At once, Fleet Admiral." Majestic's curt voice boomed. "Ladies and gentlemen, the following report was prepared using the black box data of the Far Away and Massachusetts." he explained. "First, lets look at what we saw."

A Three-Dimensional model of the seven ships in formation appeared before the committee.

"Now, notice they are only made up of two designs. The largest appears to be eight hundred and eleven meters in length from stern to bow. Its size suggests it to be a Heavy tonnage vessel, likely a Destroyer at least or Cruiser at most. Just slightly bigger than the Far Away," A scale model appeared, placing the Far Away beside the enemy Cruiser. "The other six vessels were significantly smaller. Just barely topping out at six hundred and twenty meters in length, Their mass was also greatly reduced compared to the Cruiser. They were however very agile and able to pull off turns at speed. The Cruiser as well while being slower was also capable of impressive mobility despite its size. Obviously, this species places a high

value in agility."

"They also appear to be very adapt using that agility as they set up an ambush at range that severely damaged the Lancer and Final Say in one swoop, finishing off the Final Say in the ensuing pass. This showed they were quite capable of planning close fly-bys against our ships and they also managed to pick up that our ships were all mounted with a forward gun that they stayed out of the way of." Majestic went on as the screen changed to a recreation of the strafing run the unknowns had used on the small fleet.

"What sort of weapons do they use?" Hood asked.

"Well, that parts both easy and tricky." Majestic replied, the model changed back to the enemy Cruiser. "The round that impacted the _Final Say _was like a standard issue MAC gun impact, fragments of armor found by the _Unseen Dagger _suggest high velocity kinetic slug rounds. But, these ones have a bit of a twist."

A model of one of the supposed rounds appeared next. It was a frozen image from the _Massachusetts_ Black Box, as they had seen the Cruiser finish off the _Lancer _in a strafing pass. "It appears that the slug it fired, despite impacting with the kinetic energy of a medium weight round, is significantly smaller than said round. Andâ€¦" it zoomed, "Wrapped in some form of energy field. Its not plasma, but whatever it is, it somehow allowed them to turn a slug no bigger than an TV impact with the force of a bus." the image flickered again and was replaced by the image of one of their Plasma torpedo look-a-likes. "These are also made of the same energy, though in a much more concentrated form. Damage to the hull when these weapons impacted was almost laughable, mostly deep burns akin to Covenant Fighter craft level plasma weapons. But," Majestic paused, the hologram pausing a bit before it continued. "_Massachusetts_' Black Box revealed that when these rounds impacted them, Several systems went haywire in the local zone of impact. Systems overload, power fluctuations. But that's not the most interesting part of these missiles."

A second image, again from the _Massachusetts_, appeared. This time it was of the _Far Away _and its use of the RHLB defense to block the missiles. "Now, play it a bitâ€¦slow it down," the image turned video played in one frame a second, slowly, the missiles flew forward and then impacted the Hard Light shields that snapped into place to block, the image froze. "Now, look closer."

Majestic zoomed in and the committee stared. "See? The impacts distorted the Hard Light barrier, not break, but they certainly did more to it than anything we've used against them bar nuclear detonations and Heavy MAC rounds. The _Far Away _also didn't report any systems malfunctions, so the defensive measure worked, but the fact the missiles managed to distort, or disrupt, Hard Light barriers alone is interestingly alarming."

One of the committee members frowned and asked, "How come they didn't notice seven ships until only after they opened fire?" He asked now. "You'd think long range sensors would pick something like that up."

"Maybe they had cloaking devices?" One Captain spoke up from his chair.

"No, actually." Majestic spoke now, his avatar appearing before them again. "That was just horrid luck on our part. How we missed this will be forever beyond me, but when our ships travel through the Device, it envelops them in an energy field before firing themâ€¦" the AI explained, shaking his head. "Apparently, that energy _sticks_ to the hull of our ships for a time, throwing off sensor readings. When the _Eye of the Beholder_ and _Far Away_ returned, it took four standard hours for the energy fields to dissipate."

"Wait, so every time we jump across one of those things, we're essentially sensor blind for four hours?" A Vice Admiral asked, looking incredulous. Some of the other UNSC brass shared his look.

"More or less." Majestic replied.

"Seems like a gross oversightâ€¦" Hood muttered, shaking his head.

"We never would have known if not for the reports filed from the crew of the _Massachusetts_ and _Far Away_." Majestic flexed his wings and yawned. "Though, heat sensors worked as they should, the enemies engines were what tipped us off. They likely thought themselves caught when they fired and moved ahead to try and engage. Lucky us, had they remained stationary they might have gotten off another volley before the ships manually traced the shots back to them."

"Yes, this whole event has been about luck, hasn't?" another civilian grumbled.

The committee mulled this over in silence. Micheal himself was staring at the images in thoughtful relief. His wife had been aboard the _Far Away_ and had gotten a front seat view to the battle, and he still hadn't been able to see her yet because of this meeting and _Far Away_'s stationing on the security fleet inside the Prometheus System. He missed her, and worriedâ€¦ he was considering using some of his contacts inside ONI to try and move her somewhere else, perhaps the Earth Defense fleet?

But for now, these unknown species. Their technology was interesting, as were their tactics and style. They had used brilliantly and, by UNSC standards, risky moves to place the fleet off balance despite outnumbering them. They had also allowed the _Eye of the Beholder_ to break off and flee, why? There were too many unknowns here.

He was up for a fight, but it was easy to say that when he wouldn't be on the front lines in unknown territory. The Fleet Admiral was talking a good game, butâ€¦ was it worth the risks?

Butâ€¦ He thought to himself. _Is it worth the risk of being cautious and the Fleet Admiral being proven right?_ He closed his eyes.

Damned troublesome aliens.

Majestic blinked once and his eyes turned to Leonardo. "Fleet Admiral, we're getting communications from Sanghelios, it appears to be non other thanâ€¦ Imperial Admiral Rtas 'Ter Vadum." he reported,

sounding just as surprised as the rest of the committee if their expressions were anything to go by. "Shouldn't I put him through?"

Leonardo nodded. "Of course," as if he wasn't surprised how quickly the Sangheili Imperial Admiral had gotten wind of this.

A moment later the Majestic's holographic image shifted and was replaced by the imposing figure of Rtas 'Ter Vadum. Easily the most powerful Sangheili and an older friend of the Arbiter. The Sangheili's eyes took in the Committee a moment before he turned back to Leonardo and bowed his head and placing a fist to his chest in the Sangheili salute.

"_Fleet Admiral Leonardo Petrov_," Rtas greeted evenly in practiced English, something he had become increasingly efficient at. Rtas and Leonardo were on friendlier terms than most humans and Sangheili in the upper echelons of their respective governments. A friendship that had spawned from UNSC Ship-to-ship combat simulation games between the pair, sort of their Chess. "_I am sorry if I am intruding_."

Leonardo would normally wave away the worry, but in the presence of the committee he had to maintain the image of a stoic leader in the eyes of the civilians and other brass. He returned the salute with a nod. "It is fine, Imperial Admiral." he waited until Rtas lowered his hand and stood less rigidly. "To what do we owe the honor of being contacted by someone of your status, Admiral?"

Rtas' head lifted slightly and the Sangheili looked contemplative a moment before replying. "_Word has reached the Empire of your higher Military alert status in the new system, Prometheus and the news footage has also been seen here in Empire space._" he bowed his head again. "_The Arbiter, and myself, are deeply sorry for the losses of your warriors._"

The Committee gave mixed reactions to the bow and apology, some were sternly staring at the Sangheili, others whispered their thanks and some just sat in silence. Leonardo sighed softly, "As are we, Imperial Admiral," he muttered.

Rtas raised his head again and flicked his arm aside, the fabric cape hanging over his left shoulder piece flew with it, hanging on his back now as he stood more aggressively. "_I humbly request you allow us the chance to aid you against this new foe who dares to spill the blood of Humanity, who have been nothing but friends and guiding hands to the Sangheili since our civilizations troubles at the end of the great war._" he raised a fist, clenching it. "_Give us this chance to aid you to crush this foe._"

Leonardo blinked, the only sign of his surprise to the offer of military aid against the new enemies and his logical mind immediately went to work on how best this could be for Humanity. Sangheili aid would greatly improve the fleet strength of the offensive fleet he had in mind. It would also show another great cooperative action between the two species since the Joint Special Operations against the Covenant Remnants led by Jul 'Mdama during the Didact War.

A few of the committee began to murmur and he raised a hand for silence. He got it. "Imperial Admiral, exactly what assets are you

willing to commit to this military aid effort?" he asked simply while he stared at the Imperial Admiral.

Rtas replied flatly. "The Fleet of Vengeful Repentance."

Leonardo was now almost ecstatic inside, the Fleet of Vengeful Repentance was composed of at least a hundred vessels, several CSO and CAS Supercarriers, CCS-Class Battlecruisers and the remainder being Destroyers, Corvettes and Frigates. It was a newly created fleet that had been brought together by willing Ship Masters who volunteered to be part of the fleet who would be named as an apology and oath to Humanity that the Sangheili would work to right its wrong doings to them. To Avenge the lives they took and in turn Repent for their sins. Hence the naming of the fleet.

Leonardo himself had been with Hood at the Fleets creation ceremony in orbit above Sanghelios when he was just a Rear Admiral and Hood had still been Fleet Admiral of the UNSC Navy.

"Very well, Imperial Admiral" Leonardo gave a nod. "Then, I believe we should begin discussing the upcoming offensive operation I've had in mind for awhile now. But first," he turned his gaze on the committee. "Ladies and gentlemen, as this is a Military Operation planning conference, you all must depart who are not military." He bowed his head. "Sorry."

The civilians gave their assent, though he was glared at by Sharon, they all stood, bowed their heads and silently left the room. Soon, it was just the military leaders.

Leonardo to Rtas. "Now, Imperial Admiral." he turned to the others remaining in the room. "My fellow UNSC commanders and Admirals. Allow me to brief you on my proposed plan." he brought a tablet from his dress uniform and said. "Majestic, file X-77-20 on my tablet."

"Of course, Fleet Admiral." Majestic replied, his avatar appearing beside Rtas, smaller in stature compared to the Sangheili. A series of notes began to appear on in the air where Majestic once stood. "My plan is simple. The Prowler, Unseen Dagger, will launch a Slipspace com probe and broadcast its coordinates to the primary assault fleet." He explained. "Once there, we will commit a mass jump to those coordinates, which will hopefully be right at their door. Our fleet will then engage the enemy fleet and if they are over a planet, we will send in ground forces to secure a major population center and several military installations."

Rtas and the other brass listened to the plan as Leonardo explained with rapt attention.

"Once we've established a foothold planet side and secures the locations. We'll force the local population in a lockdown, no leaving the planet and not allowing any military ships to and from the planet itself. Civilian vessels however that are already in the air will be allowed to escape and the population, civilian anyway, will not be targeted and collateral damage will be kept to a minimum if all possible."

Hood mumbled after a moment. "A show of force, not a slaughter." He sighed, "I agree. But we don't know their fleet size. They could have thousands of ships, maybe anti-air planet side. We don't know of

their capacity."

"And they don't know ours," Leonardo countered easily and without pausing. "That is why I want the Fleet of Vengeful Repentance on standby for the second phase of the operation." he smirked. "When we take the planet, and make no mistake gentlemen, we need to. When we take the planet. I've no doubt the enemy will assemble large retaliation fleet to retake itâ€| and when they arrive. The Imperial Admiral's fleet will make Slipspace jumps to three locations behind their formation. We will pincer them between our two fleets. Create a kill zone."

Hood quickly caught on. "And then we force contact and offer them terms for a ceasefire?" he asked, raising an impressed brow.

"Exactly," Leonardo chuckled. "We will hand their planet back to them on a silver platter, but not before we've handed their asses to them on a golden one. We'll show our military might, that we have powerful friends and that we are not beyond reason." he stood. "We'll show them our strength."

Rtas stepped forward slightly, bringing a fist to his chest and bowing his head. "_A sound plan, humble the enemy and then offer them peace or a long and bloody battle_." He gave a huff of respect, "_Fleet Admiral. The _Fleet of Vengeful Repentance _is at your disposal_. _For this operation on my word as Imperial Admiral of the Sangheili Empire_."

The Fleet Admiral nodded his thanks, then said. "Good, Get the fleet ready, Imperial Admiral. I'll send you the Slipspace Coordinates and when they arrive."

"The fleet will be ready, Fleet Admiral." Rtas performed the Sangheili salute once more before his image faded away.

"Now," Leonardo said slowly. "Majesticâ€| connect to the _Daedalus_, we're going to give her a debut worthy of a warship."

Majestic reappeared, giving a tiny smile. "Of course, Fleet Admiral."

**January 12, 2582. Military Calendar.

>UNSC Prowler _**Unseen Dagger**_**, Unknown System. 0800 Hours.

>The Prowler had deployed not a full hour after the return of the _Far Away _and while the public's attention was elsewhere. Mainly on the Destroyer. The _Unseen Dagger _had made the jump across the device in secret. Like all Prowlers, the hull was shadow black and relatively small by UNSC ship standards, more like a bloated Longsword fight loaded with state-of-the-art stealth and electronic counter-measures. They also had a small payload of two SHIVA-Class warheads and a handful of Slipspace Com probes.

Once the Prowler had jumped, it immediately sped off towards the last known coordinates of the unknown vessels, once there it trailed their path as recorded by the _Far Away_.

Commander Nero sat in the command chair at the bridge of the Prowler, watching space move along on the main view window while his crew, the

bridge crew. Him and said crew were the only ones who manned the prowler. He stared out, then. "Activate cloaking field and engage heat sinks. Communications. We're going dark people."

"Yes, Commander." The shipboard AI, Vector Alpha, replied.

The Prowler was soon enveloped in an Active Camouflage blanket and the internal heat sinks would keep the ship cool as space while the AvCam was active, the engines were put onto low burn and their communications array was shut down.

The Prowler moved along, using its gained momentum to keep up its speed as it closed on the planet, it was green with blue, splotches of cloudâ€¦ you'd almost assume it was Earth. But the Commander knew it wasn't, the landmasses were different, not enough water and there were at least eighty-five ships in orbit over it.

"Found em," Nero muttered, narrowing his eyes. "Get me a read on how many ships we're dealing with."

"Right away, Commander." Operations replied, working furiously. Moments later, "Sir, we read eighty-seven ships in orbit." the officer said, "And five more incoming at range, looks like they're fortifying the planet."

"Or getting a battle group ready," Nero countered. "Can you get a read of what's on the planet's surface?"

"No sir, we'd have to get closer."

"So lets," Nero replied. "Vector, move us in."

The Prowler used a microburst to accelerate forward, when it was just under eight hundred meters from the other ships of the fleet, another pair stopped it and the Prowler froze in place. So close they could see in detail most of the ship closest to them. "Perfect. Alright, get a reading now?" Nero asked.

"Sir, scanning. Might take awhile,"

Two minutes ticked by, then three. On the fourth Operations spoke up.

"Scans relatively complete. I'm detecting multiple groundside generators, power plants if I had to guess. Looks like this planet is a colony or their homeworld."

Nero shook his head. "Not their homeworld. Their ships have tech beyond a species that wouldn't have expanded beyond their homeworld by now. This is a colony, I'm sure of it." he raised a hand to his chin and gave a thoughtful hum.

Their mission was to follow the enemy craft and then drop a single Slipspace Com Probe to mark its location. The Slipspace com probe acted on a timer and when the count reached zero it would send its exact coordinates in a communication through a mini Slipspace transmission to the Atlas back over Earth. This would expose the probe's location of course, but its job would be done. The location and coordinates would be sent.

And then entire battle group could make a mass Slipspace jump and appear right on the enemies store step with guns blazing. The ultimate ambush.

"Bring up the Tactical Map, Vector." Nero said, making up his mind to do more than what his mission required of him. How could he not? His brother had been an engineer aboard the _Final Say _and that was why he had volunteered for this mission. As a Prowler he couldn't fight, but he could damn well make sure that when the UNSC came to kick down these things front door it would be in so great a fashion that they'll feel it all the way back in their homeworld.

He owed his brother that much.

The TacMap was displayed for him. Showing a general overhead view of the enemy fleet formation. "Alright, fire the nuke hereâ€|" he tapped the map. The spot was highlighted. "Set its detonation timer to ten seconds before the Slipspace Com probe fires its location. That should give the fleet enough time to jump in and avoid the burst of EMP."

The probe itself would be safe since it was hardened against EMP bursts.

"Probe awayâ€|" a moment later. "Missile away." Operations looked at him. "Mission complete sir."

The Commander nodded. "Alright, turn us around, take us out to three thousand and then send word back to the fleet via Tight Beam. Tell them we'll remain station in this system to observe the enemy fleet."

"Aye, Commander."

Now, all Nero could do was wait and watch when the fireworks began. And he had a front row seat.

****End of Chapter Five****

****Welp, there's Chapter Five. As of Six operation: SUNDOWN will commence and the First contact war will have unofficially officially begun! Now, you know the drill people, comments, compliments, suggestions? PM or review. Have a nice day/night. Also, yes. Rtas Vadum is now Rtas 'Ter Vadum, Imperial Admiral of the Sangheili Empire! Give Half-jaw a round of applause for his appearance and promotion!****

7. Chapter six

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

Author Notes: Now, I wasn't sure how Turians named their ships, "HWS" "MSV" or whatever the like, wiki doesn't say. So I went with HWS, meaning Hierarchy War-Ship. Nor how they labelled timesâ€| or days. Kinda stumped me on that, so, went with cycles, excluded days and yeaaaaah. ****

_PS. For those curious, Falcus is the world where Eden Prime should have been, essentially, Turians now have Eden Prime. Why? Well,**

you'll see later.**_

****Chapter Six****

****Turian Colony Falcus, 2148. Council Calendar.**

>HWS _**Enforcer**_, **_**Dreadnaught**_-Class. Fleet Commander Vyrenus. 21:00 Cycles.

>Vyrenus watched as five more ships joined them in orbit over the colony of Falcus. One of the Hierarchy's more secluded Colonies but nonetheless well defended because of the richness of the planet. Its soil was ripe for various forms of plant life and its fields home to many herd animals. The weather was perfect and the scenery was beautiful. It was a shining example of the galaxy's most beautiful worlds.

And now it was at risk.

As of twenty-seven cycles ago one of the Hierarchy's patrol fleets had detected activity from a dormant relay on the opposite end of the system. They had kept their distance and observed what came through, five ships had come through. One dreadnaught and four Destroyers by their sizes. They had been bulky, slow moving craft. Turtles.

Intelligence gathered from the patrol suggested they used forward guns, the ships designs had suggested that much. They were moving from one of the planets and were just passing in the shadow of its moon when the Commander of the ship had decided to launch the first attack on these unknowns vessels as per the Citadel Law concerning the activation of dormant relays without explicit permission from the council directly or one of the top three government forces.

The Commander had tried to hail them, but they had ignored it. One of the ships had been fleeing the battle, from the ships profile it had been deemed a civilian vessel, less weapons and more windows.

While the patrol fleet had them outnumbered. The Commander had done the wise move and set up an ambush, it said wonders about how primitive those whales were if their sensors hadn't picked up the patrol fleet until only after they had fired.

The resulting battle, according to the reports filed from the survivors said the opening of the battle had been going extremely well. The Commander's more nimble ships had flown circles around the slower craft crippling two in the first pass and destroying one in the second wave before coming around for another. It was textbook combat against a slower opponent.

That was until the Dreadnaught of the group had opened fire with a series of turret mounted kinetic Cannons that destroyed two Frigates and would have taken the third had it not been for the mobility of the craft. Still, they had it outnumbered and it was the only left. It should have been a victory.

Instead, the enemy had used a nuclear weapon, obliterating a Dreadnaught and a Frigate.

Council Law had forbid Nuclear weapons as well from being used in space or on the ground. These unknowns had broken two laws in less than twelve cycles! After that, the Commander of the remaining

Frigates pulled back and retreated to Falcus to inform the Hierarchy. The enemy ship hadn't pursued, likely to regroup with its own allies elsewhere. A Corvette was stationed near the Relay as a watchdog to inform Falcus Command when they came through. They'd have an early warning when the enemy presented themselves. Assuming they didn't attack in the next four cycles orders from Palavan were to go through the Relay and find the system they retreated to, if none were found. Then it would speak volumes about the idiocy of this species in its disregard for caution.

"Commander," One of his communications operators called. "The last of the reinforcements have arrived. The Vigilant reports the Relay is still clear."

Vyrenus nodded. Good, so, they were still licking their wounds or, like the Hierarchy to them, didn't know where to strike to ensure a decisive victory. It was times like this that Vyrenus wished they Hierarchy would allow the Salarians to lend their aid in the form of an STG stealth craft to attempt to find their system. But, Palavan command had been clear this was a policing action only and it was to reinforce that the Turians were the military dominant species for a reason.

"Connect me to the sub-fleet Commanders." Vyrenus ordered, standing straight and getting himself to address his The Sub-Fleet Commanders. Sub-Fleet Commanders were Commanders of other Dreadnaughts but didn't have Operation control like Vyrenus did. They would serve as his various Lieutenants instead during the operation.

"You're on, Commander."

"Commanders, I'm glad you've all arrived quickly. I'm sure you've all been briefed by Command so I'll skip that part. Twenty-seven cycles ago Palavan Command issued us orders to begin defensive preparation for possible hostilities from the unknown species who accesses the local relay." The Fleet Commander explained as he placed his hand behind his back. He straightened his back a bit more. "Failing that in the next four cycles well we will be sending scout ships to find their system and we here will march on their planet and are to occupy it and pacify the population. Using that as leverage to force them into submission."

His mandibles twitched, the idea of taking an entire planet hostage to force submission was a low blow, but it was effective and had proven so in past conflicts. Sides against Krogan who'd shoot down their allies along with the enemy.

"So, Sub-Fleet Commanders, finalize your formations now, when we move out, I want orderly formations and all hands at battle ready status. If you aren't already," he sniffed. "You probably shouldn't be in this fleet."

That got a few chuckles from the Sub-Commanders, of course they were all ready for battle. When the Turians conduct a military, or policing action, they don't make such gross oversights as to be not ready even though they were in their own territory.

Vyrenus was impressed with the amount of ships the Hierarchy had sent to join in this Operation. Ninety-four ships, nine of which were Dreadnaughts, forty-two Frigates and fifty Corvettes and two

Carriers. Each Carrier holding at least two hundred Fighter craft each, but they lacked any real firepower so they'd be at the dead center of the overall fleet formation, protected and useful. The Frigates and Corvettes would also have to be placed accordingly to provide the best possibly fields of fire for an incoming enemy presence.

If things went according to plan this conflict would be over within the next twenty cycles.

That was the last thing Fleet Commander Vyrenus thought before a little pinprick of light erupted from the middle of his of still organizing fleet. The pinpricks burned white hot, blinding those closest to them before their kinetic barriers shattered, their hulls burned and peeled away as if wax against a blowtorch and soon the skeletal frame beneath followed.

The Eezo cores breached then detonated.

Fleet Commander Vyrenus and a third of his tightly packed fleet were vaporized as the SHIVA warhead detonated.

****January 13, 2582. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC _Infinity**_**-Class Command Ship **_**Daedalus**_**, Prometheus System. 0190 Hours.**

>There were many things the UNSC would remember for years to come and more were coming. But four hours ago another had been added to the list the moment when the fleet of eighty-nine had been joined by the second _Infinity_-Class ship in the fleet, the _Daedalus_. Unlike the _Infinity_ which had been designed and then only added with Forerunner tech later on over the years of its construction the _Daedalus_ was designed and incorporated the most Forerunner technology of any ship in the UNSC fleet. Even _Infinity_ couldn't boast such an achievement. Construction had started on Daedalus in 2560 and had been completed in 2581. This would be its first appearance to the public and Fleet.

As it exited Slipspace. It dwarfed every ship it flew past, the silvery-grey surface shone in Prometheus' sun. Across its hull in dark lettering was "UNSC Daedalus" and on the other side "For thy Mantle upheld."

The ship was large, it exuded power with its mere presence. At fifty eight hundred and eleven meters in length, nine hundred and seven in width and finally eleven hundred and fifty-eight in height. It was larger than Infinity in every dimension. The frame was Titanium A and the outer hull was made of 3 meters of Titanium A3 plating with another 2.5 meters of Forerunner designed hull material, the marines just called it Titanium AF plating. Giving it a total of 5.5 meters of armor plating. It was EMP shielded, strong and had an off silvery-grey glow in the sun.

It was also powered by the latest XR3 BF: S90 Reactor. Much more powerful than the XR2 BG Core the _Infinity_ had on her. She was faster, had more power to spare and that all went into her various weapons systems. Like the latest Destroyers, the _Daedalus_ was armed with particle projectors. The forward cannon was a Mark Two Particle Accelerator. The beam was more concentrated then the ones mounted on the Destroyers, more akin to the _Infinity_'s forward MAC guns. The narrower beam however increased the core temperature of the beam

itself resulting in temperatures three times as hot as plasma torpedoes.

The beam essentially fired trillions of tiny pieces of hardlight inside its firing chamber, gathering them up before firing them so fast the pieces appear as a singular long beam. They shredded, burned and carved whatever they hit. And Daedalus had two of these mounted on her bow. She also had over eighty Mark 2488 MAC turrets placed across her. And nine hundred 80mm Gatling Point-Defense guns. She had a payload of five Nuclear HAVOK missiles along with enough standard issue Howler, Archer and Rapier missiles to blanket large surfaces of a planet with ordnance. She had Energy shielding covering her hull for a second layer of defense. And she even made use of Reactive Hard-Light Barrier defense grids as well.

She carried enough vehicles, ranging from Mongoose to Mammoths to fill two decent sized UNSC Destroyer hangers to the brim. And over twenty- two thousand personnel, a good portion of that being marines and an ODSI division along with several Spartan Fireteams. Unlike Infinity which was supposed to double as an exploration and science ship, the Daedalus had been designed fully as a war ship. All science facilities had been removed from planning to make room for added troop barracks and officers quarters. There was hardly any unused space left on the ship. It was so large it required several trams and lifts to get from one point to the next.

The Daedalus was indeed a terrifying beauty. And she would be heading up this Operation.

"Admiral Lasky, we've exited slipspace." Navigations Officer Lieutenant Vance spoke up. "Joining the rest of the fleet now sir, they've saved us a spot."

Admiral Thomas Lasky, former Captain of the UNSC Infinity until just a month ago when he was reassigned by CentCom to Captain the Daedalus. Born on the month of August in 2510 and attended Corbulo Academy for Military Sciences. His family had a strong sense of military service, his mother and brother both having served in the UNSC before their deaths. He was one of the most decorated men alive in the UNSC today.

At Seventy-one and Admiral, he was one of the few inside the UNSC that despite his age has managed to remain as a Captain of a ship rather than sit back at Earth behind a desk or in retirement. His empathetic and fair attitude well liked by the crew of the Infinity and those he had served with.

"Very good, Lieutenant Vance." Lasky said, sitting up in his chair. The dark hair around his head was just beginning to grey and his face showed his age, but his eyes were still bright with life. He was frowning slightly, though more about the current situation than anything that was wrong with the crew. "Bring us to the head of the fleet now. Have the second and third flank fleets form up on our right, the first and fourth to our left. The Destroyers with Hardlight shielding up front. I want the other ships to take up arrow formations behind them."

"Making it happen, Admiral." His communications Officer replied, typing furiously as his console.

"Navigations, put the countdown timer to the operation on my tablet." He paused when the doors to the bridge opened and in marched Captain MacMillan. "Captain, when I heard you were assigned to my ship I almost didn't believe it was you." Lasky smile and returned the salute that MacMillan gave him while he had been speaking.

"Admiral Lasky," MacMillan greeted, the edges of his lips twitching slightly. "Last I saw you, you were still just a Vice Admiral commanding Infinity, how is the old girl?"

MacMillan had served with Lasky on seven separate occasions during the years of 2559 across 2564 in putting down insurrectionist activity when they tried to spark up again, Infinity had destroyed twenty asteroid bases used by the Insurrection at that point. The UNSC had then poured more funding into the outer colonies, increasing pay and along with various production yards for civilian vehicles. Creating more job opportunities.

By the time 2567 rolled around, Insurrectionist activity dropped to an all time low while the outer colonies prospered. The last major Insurrectionist attack was two years ago.

"Last I saw her, she's fine." Lasky replied with a good natured laugh. "She better still be, I find out that Captain they gave her in my stead ain't taking care of her I'll have to have words with him."

They both laughed for a moment before they were silent.

"Right, Captain. We'll have to catch up later, for now. I need you commanding my troopers when we jump. Daedalus will be carving a path down to the planet. You and the troopers will be going feet first. Secure us a landing zone so we can start dropping vehicles and troops." Lasky explained.

MacMillan nodded, "Right, sir. Don't worry, we'll clear the table for you and the others." he replied simply, then added. "Rules of Engagement?"

"I don't want Civilian casualties, if they're a military outpost, shoot whatever looks military uniform, but no children or women." He said, expression firm. "Clear?"

"Sir, clear. I'll try my best." MacMillan snapped off a salute. He knew of Lasky's tight moral leash, it was one of the many things that made him popular with the public and general troopers alike. Some took it as naivety, but MacMillan knew better, Thomas wasn't naïve, he just didn't see the point in doing something if it was morally incorrect.

"Please do," Admiral Lasky nodded. "Now, get down to the drop bays. Operation commences in nine minutes" and it's a two minute tram ride and three minute lift ride." Lasky smiled.

"Of course sir," MacMillan turned and marched out, just muttering a "cheeky bastard" before the doors closed behind him.

With the ODSI gone Lasky turned back to the viewing screen and observed on the TacMap as the fleet got into formation. A good seventy-five ships, plus the Daedalus made it seventy-six. The ships

moved into their assigned formations. The Destroyers and Cruisers with Hard-Light shielding took the front waves. Those without moved behind and clustered closer to each other.

"Mmm," A sensual voice purred over the bridge speakers. Lasky looked up.

"Finally awake, Lilith?" Lasky joked, smiling slightly as the avatar of the seventh generation Smart AI, Lilith appeared on the holopad next to him. He looked at her.

Lilith's avatar was wrapped in a black fabric that hung off her shoulders and clung to her voluptuous frame, her wrists were adorned with shackles as were her ankles. Her face was young, striking and hair flowing down to the small of her back.

When Lasky asked why she chose such an avatar. She had replied that her form was to show the utter beauty of being a Smart AI, able to think so fast it made the smartest humans slow and the shackles represented the limited time they lived and that like all things they were shackled to mortality.

"I never sleep, my dear Admiral Lasky," she teased, flicking a wrist the TacMap was highlighted, she turned to it, eyes moving over the formation. "Hmm, very nice. I do so love seeing men and woman fall into formation."

Lasky had long since gotten used to Lilith's persona. She was already a year old and designed specifically for use with _Daedalus_. Despite her ratherâ€| provocative personality she was a fine asset to have. She handled Point-Defense, Cyberwarfare and Slipspace jump calculations. Lasky wouldn't trade her for another.

"Yeah, well, too bad it's a formation for war," Lasky muttered, sighing softly before raising an aging hand to massage his temples a bit. "What's the timer looking at?"

"Six minutes till the Operation," Lilith informed him. She tilted her head and frowned a bit. "Hmph, Only seventy-six ships? For something like this you'd think they'd send more." she commented dryly.

"Don't forget the Strident Frigates sitting in our belly, Lilith," Lasky pointed with a smile. "Technically its eighty-six."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Semantics."

"Whatever you say," Lasky laughed lowly, then coughed, raising a hand to his mouth he coughed twice more, then sighed and muttered. "Old age sucks."

"Least you'll live to see past eight, My dear Admiral," Lilith said, crossing her arms under her chest and giving him a cocked brow. "Course, I'll look just as beautiful by the time my day comes," she teased him.

Lasky smiled. "Lucky you."

"Four minutes, Admiral." Navigations reported. "Standing by to receive _Unseen Dagger_'s Slipspace coordinates for the jump now."

"Alright," Lasky stood and walked over to the forward Holopad. "I assume you've been reading up on our new friends, Lilith?" he asked while he stood in at the foot of the Holomap.

"But of course," Lilith sang lowly. "Majestic sent a very detailed report from the Atlas, I gave him my utmost thanks." she purred.

Lasky raised a brow, wanted to ask but didn't. "Good," he said simply. "Thoughts?"

"Many, but for specifics of our new enemy? With _Daedalus_ here, I think they're going to regret ever staring at us," Lilith replied with a brief chuckle. "Honestly, I'll need more data before I come to speculate on this species. Majestic, while crude is mostly right, they appear smart, militaristic and know when to run." she waved a hand. "Anything else we'll learn by the end of this."

"Socialising with the locals," Lasky whispered. "How nice."

Lilith smiled coyly. "I love socialising."

"Bet you do," Lasky smiled and then looked to the timer. Two minutes left. "Alright, send out a general call to the fleet, inform them to prep for Slipstream jump." He ordered, placing his hands behind his back.

"At once, Admiral." Communications replied.

"One minute," Lilith purred, sounding excited well, more so excited.

Lasky counted down the seconds in his head, staring into space. Finally, at zero his navigations officer's console pinged. They had received the coordinates and were cleared to jump. "Alright, commence slipstream jump, Lilith. Bring us in right on top of them." he ordered sharply.

Lilith purred. "With pleasure, Admiral."

The _Daedalus_ accelerated forward as the space before them parted into the silver-blue portal that was Slipstream space that only a Forerunner engine could produce. The ships behind the _Infinity_-Class followed them through their own slipstream portals. Once inside Slipstream space, Lasky watched the show from his standing position.

"Estimated time of arrival?" Lasky asked.

"Four minutes." Lilith replied, then raised her hand and tapping her lower lip with a finger. "Well, three minute and forty seven seconds to be precise when I'm done speaking."

"Alright." Lasky waited patiently.

A minute or so later they exited Slipstream.

And right outside an enemy fleet, which appeared to be scrambling to move out of the way as the larger _Daedalus_ appeared. The shields

sparked as they impacted A Destroyer class vessel that was too slow to move, the smaller vessel didn't stall _Daedalus_ at all and instead shattered without a thought, others were clipped as the _Infinity_-Class ship ran them down as if they were nothing but wooden planks trying to stop a bulldozer.

"I think we hit something," Lilith joked softly, her shoulders shaking as if in actual mirth.

"Launch Stridents." Lasky ordered.

"Doors opening." Lilith replied with a smile.

The belly of the _Daedalus_ opened and then five by two lines of _Strident_-Class Frigates dropped from the belly of the beast and joined the fray of combat, surprising the ships that witnessed it before being fired upon by the newly released ships.

"Lilith," Lasky said, watching the TacMap light up as the enemy craft who were further in distance turn to face the number of enemies suddenly appearing from other jump exits.

"Yes, Admiral?" Lilith replied, hand on her hip and the other resting at her side.

"You have the guns."

Lilith smiled in that coy manner she loved. "I'll give the enemy a show they'll never forget." she purred.

The _Daedalus_' various Onagar automated defense MACs powered up and began firing at nearby ships with singular, precise rounds, taking one round to shatter the shields of the opposing vessels, a second to finish them off. Often times, Lilith used a strategy, she used two turrets to fire, operating them in such a way that they fired in pairs at a single target, the larger Cruisers took three rounds to break down and one to finish off.

When the rest of the fleet arrived, they opened fire with their MAC guns on the targets dead ahead. A wave of high velocity slugs was the opening salvo.

She bit her lip slightly. "My, so many flying at us despite our overwhelming force. They're very brave." she smiled. "But bravery will not avail them, will it, my dear Admiral?"

"No," Lasky replied softly as he observed the ships get mowed down by the charging Daedalus. "All ships! Break off formation and engage targets at will!" Lasky said, knowing he was connected to the ship. "If the enemy breaks off from the battle. Do not pursue, keep them on scope and when they're out of weapons range. We want them to make it back to their central command and tell them what we've done."

This was a show of force, not brutality. No civilian casualties, no pointless shootdowns.

A number of affirmatives replied to his orders as the fleet broke off into smaller parties when the two fleets got mixed together at knife fighting range. Hulls were peppered by the unknown crafts pinpoint lasers, however, the ships were outnumbered and a large portion of

them had already gone down during the initial MAC salvo.

"Navigations, break us off and head down to the planet. Get us into dropping distance for the Helljumpers." Lasky ordered the holoprojector shifted and showed the planet they were headed to. "Lilith, find me three military installations and two major populations centers." he said.

"Trying to make me work, Admiral?" Lilith replied, smirking. "Don't worry, I'll humor you."

A moment then the Daedalus was breaching the atmosphere. "Got them, detecting two major city within the next fifty kilometres. Hereâ€| and here." the map pinged with two white checkpoints. "And military installations, likelyâ€| are here." several different locations across the fifty kilometre radius. "Guess they were right, Militaristic race."

"Right, send thee locations of those military installations to the Shakedown, Yorkanville, Freelancer, Destiny and Bureaucracy." Lasky listed the Marathon Cruisers who had been participating in the operation. "Tell them to strafe these installations with light fire, then land occupation troops."

"As you wish, Admiral." Lilith replied smoothly.

"Now, brings us over this population center." He tapped the closest city. "Inform Captain MacMillan that he and the ODSTs are dropping fifteen seconds."

"Done, Admiral."

The Daedalus cleared the atmosphere, swooped down and when they were over the major city. "Drop them."

Across the Daedalus' belly, small hatches open and allowed a hundred or so pods eject and fall towards the city below. Each contained an ODST who was gearing for a fight and waiting to hit the ground to get it started. Behind them, several Pelicans launched from the hangers carrying M12 LRVs, or Warthogs, at least thirty of them deployed, each would also have a small ten man team of marines inside their bays.

Around them, AA guns began to open fire on the descending forces. A lot of AA. This colony was well defended.

"We're clear." Lilith reported simply, flicking some of her data streamed black hair. "Are we going to return to the battle overhead while our ground forces work?" she asked.

"Yes, bring us back up into space." Lasky nodded.

"Aye, Admiral." Navigations arced the ship back up towards the atmosphere.

"Time to let the grunts go to work," Lasky whispered with a sign. "Bring us back up into orbit, Navigations."

"Aye, Admiral!"

The _Daedalus_' engines flared again and they accelerated upwards back towards space to rejoin the battle. Small plumes of flame and molten metal signaled the destruction of a UNSC ship, it had been an older destroyer, its remains floated off as the five ships that had been attacking it saw the Daedalus coming back up.

They turned to face the new threat.

"Foolish," Lilith said, eyes narrowing. "I have target locks, Admiral. Permission to use the main guns?"

"Granted." Lasky allowed her to have her fun as the enemy formation, headed by two larger ships and three Frigates accelerated towards them.

The _Daedalus_' main guns glowed a soft orange deep within the barrelsâ€¦ then like two rapier strikes lashed across space and sliced the two leading ships, their shields flickered into place, shattered a moment later and the two beams cut into the hull and then clean through the ships, skewering them.

The _Infinity_-Class ship turned and continued to fire and like Sangheili Plasma Swords skewered two more Frigates and nicking one before the guns reached dangerous heat levels. The two ships exploded and the _Daedalus_ drove through their debris fields as the main guns ceased firing.

The other two Frigates who had likely thought they escaped exploded when Lilith used the Onager MAC turrets to turn them into fireworks.

"Enemy forces are breaking off from ours," Communications relayed to Lasky. "No craft are pursuing, looks like we've won."

Lasky watched the remaining enemy craft break off their various engagements and move at speed away from the planet. The Admiral regretted the loss of life on both sides, but it couldn't have been avoided. Now he just hoped this was the right move and not the opening moves to a full scale war. All he could do as an Admiral was pray he was doing the right thing and trust his gut.

"Have the fleet regroup, count our lost ships and any escape pods in space, I want them retrieved." Lasky ordered as he leaned back into his command chair.

One battle one, the next has to be won on the ground.

****End of Chapter Six****

****Well, there's chapter six. And Operation: SUNDOWN has begun! As you can see, Turian nor UNSC don't mess around when its time to get stuff done. Now, you all know the drill, have a nice day/night.**

>

8. Chapter seven

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Seven****

****January 13, 2582. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC _**Infinity**_-**Class Command Ship **_**Daedalus**_**, Unknown system. 0400 Hours.

>The battle in space had gone as planned, too much as planned. Lasky was getting a bad feeling that an operation in space had gone so smoothly that he was worried about the ground troops he sent dirtside to secure a series of LZs for them to set down occupation vehicles to further increase their presence on the ground.

But before he could worry anymore, he had to manage the situation up here. The unknown hostile fleets had pulled back and upon realising that Lasky didn't pursue them past the established twenty kilometre marker he set up for the occupation fleet, they were now patrolling along the invisible line that they should not cross. Of the seven dozen of so ships that Lasky had seen, only twenty-three, four of which were critically damaged and had to be scuttled shortly after they reached the line. Leaving only nineteen ships.

He had to admit, this species knew its stuff. They had quickly found out how close he was willing to allow them in just two hours and had effectively began to patrol along the border of it. Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, they roved around the planet at cruise speed while Lasky's fleet moved as three schools of sharks around said planet in high orbit, acting as border patrol.

He could feel them waiting for any sort of opening, a too large gap to exploit to send their ship in close and try to flank one of the patrol fleets.

Of course, for the ships destroyed, Lasky did suffer his own casualties. He had lost twelve Frigates outright in the initial scramble to enemy combined fire at near point blank range and five more were severely damaged while another fifteen were currently running EVA repairs on themselves while they were on patrol, naturally, the Daedalus took most of the damaged ships into its fleet and sent over some handy Huragok to aid in the internal repairs of the Frigates since Daedalus itself had suffered no noteworthy damage.

This species had certainly tried to give what it got. And it succeeded in making Lasky more alert to the threat they posed.

"Enemy fleet position, Lilith?" Lasky asked as he examined the holoprojector, repair rates for the damaged fleet ships was displayed along with estimation times before completion, Huragok deployment numbers.

"Still holding at two hundred and fifty thousand kilometres, my dear Admiral," The Smart AI replied smoothly, appearing on her stand beside his command chair. "They're keeping formation, we're a pack of lions and they're Jackals waiting for an exploit. What makes them think we won't turn and blast them?"

"They know better, saw the signs." Lasky replied simply.

It was true, standing orders when they saw unarmed ships leaving the planet below had been to allow any civilian ships to leave the planet, if they were just taking off and there was a chance to disable them? That was to be done. However, the moment they hit lethal altitude they were free to go.

"Now, they're just waiting for reinforcements or for us to screw up." Lasky muttered, observing the numbers. "Status on groundside communications?"

"Still down, Admiral." Lilith said with a bit of a sigh. "Must be bad down there."

Lasky nodded. "Yeah, but we can't break away to provide support, it would leave many of the wounded ships here vulnerable, and we can't risk sending down any ships from the other two fleets just yet." he mumbled, shaking his head. "We'll send down more Pelicans when communications are established."

"Aye, admiral." Lilith nodded.

"I hope we're not getting into anything too big down there." Lasky whispered.

"It may also interest you to know I'm detecting traces of radiation common with nuclear detonation," Lilith said suddenly, as if speaking about the weather. When Lasky looked at her, she shook her head. "Not from any of our fleet, the radiation dispersion indicates it had detonated moments before we arrived, it could explain why the enemy fleet was moving out of its cluster formation when we arrivedâ€¦ they had been struck by a nuke." she paused. "If I had to guess, a SHIVA class warhead."

"SHIVA, huh?" Lasky mumbled, and before they launched? Only meant that the _Unseen Dagger_ had launched it, probably as a pre-emptive strike method to make things easier for the fleet when they arrived.

But it wasn't cleared by Command and therefore Lasky had to report it. "Lilith, link me to High Command back on the _Atlas_, Fleet Admiral Petrov will want to know about this." he sighed.

"At once, Admiral," Lilith yawned and stared at the planet they were patrolling.

****Turian Colony Falcus, 2148. Citadel Calendar.**

>Falcus Capital, Xellis. Quarian Pilgrim Calene Here'zia. 12:50 Cycles.
******"I ever get my hands on the idiot Bosh'tet who drove this thingâ€¦" A female Quarian muttered as she crouched by a aircar she was tasked with repairing by her employer. Most Quarians on Pilgrimage tended to flock to the Citadel or hunt for technology on the edges of the Veil, hoping to gather some useful stuff to return to the Migrant Fleet and be welcomed by a Captain.

That was not the life for Calene, she preferred her freedom and this would be her second full year out on Pilgrimage and she still didn't feel the need to return there. She thought she would become home sick, or miss her family, so far all she felt was content for being free to choose and carve her own path outside of a society that would likely work her to the bone simply because she probably would have

found something useful.

Oh, and she was angry at the Turian who drove this aircar in here, the internals were completely outdated! Its like whoever owned this thing didn't believe in stopping by for a checkup because they can last anywhere between one to five years. Ten or more if you took damn good care of it.

But this guy? Nope, not this guy and that made Calene angry because this thing could be five times cleaner and run fifty times smoother if he just dropped in a few years back.

She pulled one of the power couplings free and looked at the slightly smouldered piece of tech. "You're kidding me!" she whispered. The coupling was almost melted, had it done so the electrical currents to the rear drive core would have been severed, and from the lack of a backup core, which she was sure was a safety violation of itself, she had just saved this guys life.

She really wanted to slide it back into place and just clean the core and other parts, but, her professionalism demanded she not half-ass this. Since it was her only steady job she could get in the Colony, Surprisingly, and very welcomed, the Turian who owned this place was a very open minded person despite being a Turian, so he had hired her on when he had fixed one of the speeders on of his poorly trained Asari were attempting to.

She had quickly proven that, as a Quarrian, her skill with tech was unmatched and she damn well knew it. Smouldered to the internal casing coupling? Cut that out and replace it all! Malfunctioning De-thawing windows? Replace the thermal wiring running along the window. Honestly, this was all very basic stuff, but she guessed being an Asari she wasn't used to fixing tech and instead shaking her half naked ass for anyone with a credit.

Calene wasn't mean, she had just described a good portion of the Maiden stage Asari in the galaxy. Centuries of life and they spent the first hundred or so just getting laid and doing nothing productive? Calene couldn't begin to understand that level of carelessness.

"Calene!" She sighed, rubbed her lubricant stained hands on her thighs and stood up, looking at her employer as he stared down at her from his office. "Somethings happening in orbit!" he relayed to her.

She blinked in surprise. She had heard over the Extranet that there had been trouble concerning a local patrol and a fleet was being assembled in case of "unknown aggressors", she had honestly though the Turians were just talking about bold pirates thinking maybe they can make a pass at a local patrol. But why the fleet?

She turned and rushed outside to see, if anything at all since they were in orbit.

What she saw was a bright flash of light it grew to a pinhead in size then faded.

She had seen those before, lights that big spotted from ground despite being in space? That had to be fission styled explosives, or

just one. Either way, Nuclear weapons had been outlawed by the council for their massive collateral damage, both during and after the explosion. Radiation damage aside, they were horrid weapons that took decades to clean up.

And one had just been detonated over the colony.

"What's happening?"

"A nuclear weaponâ€¦" Calene replied in a whisper. "Someone detonated a nuclear weapon in orbit."

"Spritsâ€¦" her boss looked skywards, they stood there as others joined them, looking above and wondering what was happening and in moments they came.

Small smoke trails lead by flaming debris, ship pieces burning up as they fell to ground. She couldn't see them precisely, but something told her they weren't the ships that the Turian fleet were preparing to fight against.

"Should we get to the shelters?" Calene asked, turning to her boss who was still staring with eyes wide and mandibles spread in shock. "Kallus!"

"Yeah," he snapped out of it, shaking his head. "We probably should."

He turned away and Calene made to follow him. Then a woman screamed, grabbed her child and ran for the nearest speeder. That forced the pair to look up again.

A ship, so huge it parted the clouds before it and slid down towards the planet. It was massive! It could have been a piece of the Citadel for how massive it was! And it was coming straight for Xellis.

"Keelahâ€¦" Calene whispered, taking a step back as she watched it descend. If that thing crashed here, the impact force alone would do half the city or more in, its body would probably drag along, flattening anything that got in its way.

"We can't hide from thatâ€¦" Kallus muttered, hanging his head.

And then, the ship pulled up. It pulled up and began to pass over the city. It wasn't crashing! The thing was flying in atmosphere at that size?! "It's that bigâ€¦ and can operate in Atmosphere?" Kallus called over the sounds of rising panic.

She shared his astonishment. Easily.

Several hundred hatches appeared across the belly of the large ship and moments later each spat out a small black object that sped down, at first she thought they were bombs, that they were going to bomb the city.

But when the AA guns stationed around Xellis began to fire at them, they moved along, one of them took a burst and exploded, they weren't bombs, if they were that would have been more impressive.

One impacted a skyscraper, slamming through the window and walls where it disappeared. She tracked another, it slammed two blocks down, clipping an aircar along the way. She looked up in time to see two crash through the roof of their aircar repair station and into the building itself, the ground thundered with their impacts.

She and Kallus, likely against both their better judgements, moved to see what had fallen. They found a device, a pod, and before they could get closer the hatch of the first hissed and popped off, They watched as a black armored bipedal form stepped out, its body entirely covered by black and gray plating and undersuit. It regarded them a moment, its soft blue visor on them before it turned and reached into the pod, withdrawing a single long barrelled weapon from it and shouldering it.

The second pod opened, and another figure stepped out, tapping the side of his head to likely try and clear it of disorientation after being dropped from Keelah knew how high! The second didn't bother looking at them and instead just pulled a smaller weapon from the pod, then a larger weapon, some sort of heavy weapon.

It placed that onto its back, shouldered the smaller one and the pair shared a small muffled conversation, her translator couldn't make out the words, she caught a few here and there but she doubted they were switching between old Asari, retro Turian and ancient Drell and a dozen or so unknown languages.

And then, the local law enforcement showed up!

She and Kallus barely got words out before the officers opened fire on the pair of aliens, who quickly took cover and returned their own bouts of fire. Calene dove, why? She wasn't near the action, but, she dove. And Kallus reached for a wrench attempted to help the officers.

The one with the long barrelled rifle saw this, turned her rifle to Kallus and with the roar of a shot the unshielded Turian fell back onto the floor with a sizeable chunk of his face missing. The officers doubled their efforts and Calene covered her head and ducked behind the aircar she had been repairing.

Soon, the fighting stopped, she looked up and over the car and saw the two officers laying by their transport car, bloodied and dead. The two aliens? They exchanged a gesture where they bumped fists and raised their weapons again.

This time, at her.

She stood up and raised her empty hands in a gesture of non-violence she hoped translated to them as "I am not a threat!" and not "I'm charging my death ray!"

They stared at her, one shook its head and together they moved into the back of the building and disappeared into the back alley.

Calene fell to her knees, heart hammering and counting the blessings the Ancestors bestowed upon this day.

**January 13, 2582. Military Calendar.

>Major population zone, Orbital Drop Shock Trooper 22nd contingent.

0200 Hours prior.
**Shepard groaned, his head pounded and he was fairly sure he might have a concussion, he wasn't a medic though so he wasn't entirely sure. All that he knew is that he hurt _everywhere_. Around him, he could hear commotion, unfamiliar voices speaking complete gibberish, kinda like the first time he heard French as a kid, made no sense to him.

He remembered the drop. The _Daedalus_ had gone in low for a pass over of the nearest population center, apparently they were to drop in and secure local landing zones for Pelicans to send down more gear. The _Daedalus_ had also launched a few Pelicans with hogs and marines down after them for good measure.

But, John's Single Occupant Exoatmospheric Entry Vehicle, or more commonly known, HEV, had taken some Anti-Air fire from a local turret and got pinged off course.

What followed was the single most jarring experience of his life next to his first date back in high school. He had "thumped" off one of the cities skyscrapers and through a neighbouring buildings structure, where he guessed he was now jammed into the top or second top floor of after scaring their occupants silly.

And said occupants might now be trying to access his pod.

There was a muffled growl, then, several thuds, John muttered something inside his helmet and stared at the metallic floor looking at him through the cracked observation window of his pod. Then, with sudden rumble the pod was rolled onto its side, he quickly fell limp as if he was still out of it from the crash.

Two pairs of feet entered his view from the window. And they were weird, likeâ€| slimmer Sangheili feet, it was kinda freaky. Then, several more taps, then one of the aliens got to its knees and its helmeted head came down to peer into the pod. John stare back at its blackened visor, they couldn't see his past his own polarized visor.

It stared a moment before looking over its shoulder and shaking its head. A pause then a pair of oddly shaped rifles were placed against the ground and soon enough his pod door was being wedged open forcefully.

He fished for his M6H, found it and quietly racked one of the 12.8x40mm AP rounds into the chamber. He raised it slightly and waited.

The pod doors were pried open a moment later, the metal clanging against the floor and there stood the adversary. Both were decked in a mixture of blue-red armor, their helmets covered their entire head and ended in long spike up the back. Their bodies were slim, their torsos broad, really freakily built.

No time to think about their physiology now.

M6H raised, he placed the barrel to the first of the aliens visor and pulled the trigger. The round easily smashed through the visor and into the enemies face. The second reached down for his weapon, John moved his arm, fired and blew out its leg, causing him to fall forward face first onto the floor in front of the pod.

John pressed the barrel of his gun to the top of its helmeted head. He fired twice and that's all she wrote.

Unstrapping himself he rolled from his pod, stood and scoped the area over. It appeared to be some sort of office building, there were many desks, no cubicles like on Earth, but a lot of equipment that seemed like computers. He looked down at the two, kicked them each once to confirm the kills.

"Well, they don't got shields," He mumbled behind his helmet, he knelt down and pulled his MA6K from the pod's weapons bay, chambering a round into that he quickly reloaded his handgun and attached it to his hip.

He ran a quick systems check of his ODST mark. II armor. In the last thirty years ODST armor had gotten greatly appreciated overhaul. The Ballistic gel layer had been strengthened for greater ballistics defense, the hardened plates had also been redesigned to offer the same protection for less weight, they even dispensed plasma damage more effectively so they didn't melt after two blows. The plates also had limited Active Camouflage properties when active, giving an ODST better infiltration capabilities. However, their ballistic suit beneath the plating couldn't cloak, but it was still a step up.

Armor also had a more powerful power pack that recharged itself over time. It was what powered the AvCam and basic energy shielding. While yes, they had shields, they weren't as strong as those mounted on MJOLNIR armor, that would strain the power pack too much, but they could take two, three blows before failing. They just couldn't run while AvCam was active.

He cracked his neck, then when his HUD was fully active again he tried to raise the team. "This is Shepard, anyone reading me?" he spoke, kneeling and moving to a window to peer down at the city streets below.

It was a war zone. Marines and ODSTs mixed units hiding behind crashed vehicles and returning fire from other enemy soldiers in the streets and in the buildings. Plumes of smoke were evident across the skies and more than a few peoples had HEV pod crash signs on their sides.

"_Shepard? Bout time you called in, thought maybe you were dead_," Valerie "Sharps" replied to the com. "_Captain's been out of short range contact for the last twenty minutes, last transmission he told us he would be setting up a rally point at the following location, hold up, sending a Nav Point_â€|" a pause. "_Now_."

A single NavPoint appeared on his HUD a kilometre North.

"Thanks, wait, short rangeâ€| where are you?" John asked, raising a brow behind his visor.

Movement behind him, he turned around and raised his MA6K. A squad of seven soldiers entered the floor he was on, they spotted him and one of them barked out something, probably fire orders. And they did open fire. John dove behind his pod, listening to their rounds ping off its shell.

"_I'm around_." Sharps replied simply.

The glass shattered and one of the enemy soldiers who had been trying to move up suddenly fell back as the round struck its Kinetic barrier, shattering it and slamming into his chest, softened by the blow and cracking his chest armor.

Two more advanced, firing suppressing bursts out the window.

Two more rounds whizzed by, the first into their injured buddies' chest cavity, the second into the one closest to the pod. "_I got you covered. Once you're clear I'll get down to you and we can rally the guys downstairs_."

"Got it," John replied, standing and firing a burst with his rifle, spraying the unshielded enemy in the chest with three rounds, bluish blood spurted as the alien fell over, their third ally stepped and ducked behind a desk.

A shot took his shield out, then slammed into the side of his head with a sickening crack. He fell over limp.

"I thought they didn't have shields." He muttered, firing another burst into the barriers of another before ducking down to avoid the return fire a half second later.

"_They do, it's a weird system. The shield is actually seven or so inches around them, like a bubble. And it snaps into place when something comes at them_," Sharps explained. "_Kinda like the Hardlight grid on the Daedalus_."

"So that's why those two didn't have shields up," John whispered. He had been within their envelope and so they didn't have shield covering and so the only thing standing between them and his high powered rounds was armor.

He pulled a Fragmentation Grenade from his belt, primed it and then chucked it over the pod in a best guess throw. A moment later it detonated and he lifted from his cover to survey the damage, the enemy combatants were injured, moving and making odd sounds of pain.

He drew his sidearm. Put one into their heads and moved over to the lift.

He tapped the holographic display, doors closed and he began to descend. That was simple. "I'm on my way down." he reported to Sharps.

"_Me too, see you on the ground_."

**Captain Riley "Slate" MacMillan, 22nd ODST Division.

>"Hold the goddamn line!"

Captain MacMillan shouted over the blare of gunfire as he let loose an extended burst of rounds from his MA6K. The casings clattered to the ground and he ejected the magazine, inserted a new one before the spent one even touched the ground and racked a round in time with the

impact of the empty one.

He and three dozen others had established a foothold inside one of the local buildings, it had once been a bit of a vehicle depot since there was a basement level with load of the hover cars these aliens used to get around. Three floors of real estate had been locked down and now it was one of the primary rally points for the occupation forces that had been sent down.

However, several problems had come up during the brief hour of fighting. First and most troublesome being that long range communications was down so they couldn't contact the fleet overhead for reinforcements or any of the squads who went down to take out the nearby military installations.

Another was that the locals were damned persistent and tricky buggers. In the opening firefights MacMillan and a few others had believed they had the bastards on the run with several hard pushes into the city center. However, before retreating they had set up mines and various ambushes along streets and alleys, from sniper support to fast moving aircars who would strafe them with automatic fire.

They were well trained, they knew the terrain and they were making the most of it if the infirmery on level two was evidence of that.

"Corporal!" MacMillan turned to the marine beside him and the marine, who's hands were shaking just a bit, looked up at him. "Where is our support? I thought you said we'd have air support coming by to strafe the third story of that building!" He gestured to the building across from them, on its third floor were a line of enemy combatants laying down suppressive fire on them and then firing down over the covers of those on the street below.

"I don't know, Captain!" The marine replied. "I got into contact with a pilot saying he'd be here shortly."

As he finished that sentence, a voice came over the com. "_This is Pelican Kilo Five Nine, I'm in the neighbourhood and ready for a target_!"

"Pelican Kilo Five-Nine! This is Captain MacMillan of the 22nd!" MacMillan replied, ducking down to avoid a particularly close hail of rounds to his cover. "I need a strafing run on the third story of the building across from my location. Setting a nav point now." MacMillan did so.

"_I got your location, alright, cover your ears boys, its about to get _loud!"

The tell-tale rumble of a Pelican's engines roared over the gunfire and the enemies on the third story were greeted to the sight of the large grey-black craft as it hovered near the edge of the building. Its 90mm machine gun turret spun up and with the roar of a hellish beast the weapon let loose a stream of rounds that shattered the enemies shields, tore their cover to shreds and their bodies soon afterward. The Pelican drifting right along the entire floor before clearing the building.

Two oddly shaped craft, flimsy looking things, swept around another building and let loose a hail of missiles. The Pelican deftly thrust forward and the swarm of heat-seeking projectiles blew into the building at the left side street as the Pelican blazed away. The two craft, which MacMillan assumed were the enemies own gunships, gave chase.

"_Sorry guys, gotta shake these guys! I'll be back on station when I can_!"

"Copy, Kilo Five-Nine," The Captain replied. "Good luck!"

"_Don't need luck when you're _this_ good! Kilo Five-Nine out_!"

"Alright, time to take some real estate," MacMillan called up the com. "Bullfrogs, I need you on the third story of the next building! Everyone else, covering fire! The frogs on jumping!"

The various marines lifted from their covers and opened fire, spraying automatic and semi-automatic rounds at the enemy positions, forcing them into cover long enough for five of the ODSs to get a running start and leapt through windows, activating their jump jets and leaping across onto the ruined third story. They landed and gave the all clear.

"Bullfrogs, you've got the enemies right flank! Drop some grenades on the bastards in the street!"

"Sir," one of the Bullfrogs replied.

With the loss of their unit in the building, the enemies in the street didn't see the frags coming until they had fallen into their midst and with several detonations their cover couldn't save them now, the Bullfrog ODSs rained down automatic fire onto them from directly above.

The surprised hostiles looked up and returned fire, suppressing the bullfrogs but were distracted long enough for two warthogs to roll around the corner. Their mounted turrets revved up and with twin roars of automatic fire they strafed the enemy positions across the street, peppering their cover with rounds .

A few ripped through the lighter cover, followed by the enemies shields and turned whoever they struck into bloody messes. The resulting angles of fire drove the enemy up, they fired suppressing bursts at the hogs and a few more at the windows where they were being upon.

"Rockets out!" A pair of marines hefted two SPNKR launchers and moved over to the windows and aimed down at the two more heavily dug in teams of hostiles. One of them seemed to know what was coming and patted the one next to him on the shoulder, they tried to pull out.

The two rockets struck the entrenched teams, some were ground zero at the impact while others were sent flying and landed in prone heaps, unmoving. MacMillan would send teams down there to retrieve the wounded for interrogation later when the surrounding area was secured. The two hogs from before returned after turning further down the road and with some quick parking they were used as turrets to

help cover the street.

The street was now a kill zone.

"Sir, we've got reinforcements incoming on Hogs!" The Corporal smiled. "Least three hogs and they're coming in fast!"

MacMillan looked to the street below, the enemy were falling back, realizing their position in the fight wasn't as favourable anymore. He watched them go, then turned back to the Corporal, "Any luck on finding the source of the long range jamming?" he asked.

"None yet, but the distortion gets pretty strong further up north," The Corporal stood and pointed to the largest building in the center of the city. It was a large tower, it was rigid with some curves, line with floors, probably thirty-storeys high if the Captain had to guess with what appeared to be an atrium at the top.

It looked mighty important. And the enemy by all reports kept falling back North towards it. That tower was also surrounded by considerable Anti-Air defenses.

"Hmm," Captain MacMillan hummed as he crossed his arms over his chest, lifted his helmet from his head and pulled a contraband cigar from one of his suits pouches. He lit it and took a drag, then released a puff. "Corporal, see if you can't raise me Delta-Seven."

"Sir?"

"Tell them," He took another drag and puff. "I have a mission for em."

****Second Lieutenant Marcus "Beef" Brant, 22nd ODST Regiment.**

>The Lieutenant kicked the body of a down combatant over, the holes in its helmet and body along with the amount blood around it told the three ODSTs it was good and dead. "Right, nothing here," he said, lifting his MA6K back up to his shoulder. "Lets move out." He took a step, and paused when he thought he heard something.

A moment of silence passed over the three as they observed the surroundings of the small single storey building they had taken shelter inside of. Then, came a soft whimper. The three raised their weapons slightly, turning to a closed vent cover.

Marcus raised a fist, gesturing the two to cover him while he checked it out. They nodded, keeping their weapons levelled with the vent while Marcus moved forward, kneeling down he attached his rifle to his back and grasped the edges of the covering. With a tug he pulled it free with a click.

"Fu-"

An explosion shattered his shielding and sent him flying hard into the opposite wall of the room they were inside as pain lanced up and down his body, he coughed inside his helm and stared at the ceiling through his cracked visor as gunfire rang out, it sounded distantâ€| but he knew it was inside the room. He turned his head, spotting one of the other ODSTs falling back into the hall when four more of the

aliens burst in through the hole created by the explosion that had knocked Marcus flat on his ass.

The second ODS'T's shields flared under fire then shattered. As they did, the soldier's MA6K clicked empty, he dropped it and pulled his sidearm and pulled it half free from his holster when one of the aliens fired a burst into his face, the ODS'T helmet caved and the man crumpled against the wall and slid down to the floor. Dead.

The second called something out, reached down for a grenade on his belt.

He didn't see the short barrelled weapon raised at the back of his head before it turned it to paste inside the front of his helmet. Slumping down, Marcus watched the body fall until it thudded against the floor.

His sense returned in time to hear the seven aliens conversing, two keeping their weapons trained on him. The leader, while the others were decked in simple uniforms of matching colors, this one was decked in yellow, red and black colored armor with various glowing "tubes" along the neck around.

And unlike the others. It didn't wear a helmet and its bright green eyes bore down at Marcus. It had white face paint, or were they tattoos? He wasn't sure. The skin was rough, almost bone like and it had two mandibles on the side of its face. An elongated head, it almost reminded him of a tougher looking Kig-Yar.

It spoke and its voice flanged in a way that made Marcus squint. It gestured to two of the others, they nodded back, attached the weapons to their backs and they both leaned down and grabbed Marcus by the arms, hefting him up to his feet where he hung limply, too tired to stand on his own.

He lifted his head slightly, opened his mouth to mutter.
"Bastard"

The unhelmeted alien stared at him, head cocked slightly to the side and then raised his hand to the side of his head and spoke again, more aggressively. A nod, then he gestured with his two fingered, one thumb hand and the two holding Marcus began to take the ODS'T away.

The Lieutenant grunted softly. Least they didn't execute him.

****End of Chapter Seven****

****Yup, there it is! The space battle. Piece of cake! Ground battle? Dem Turians go hard or go harder! And it will also help with some character development with Delta-Seven who I'm hoping to turn into a sort of "mini protagonist" team, anyways! Y'all know the drill by now! Have a nice night/day!****

****PS. Also, in roughly three days I will be taking a LOA from FFnet for about a month, or more, depending on IRL issues. So everything will likely be stopping, this story, my witty oneshots, PM and review replies, etc etc. I will attempt to hop on, maybe give some updates. For now, I am unsure! Now, byeee!**
>

9. Chapter eight

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Eight****

_Author Note:** Now, this chapter was something I cooked up because people wanted to know where the Unggoy, Yanme'e and Hunters (I admit, their species name is the hardest to remember.) So, let me take you readers away from the strifes of war and Instead we pay a visit to Sangheili spaceâ€¦ welcome to the day in the life of the small. As for my RL issues, they're resolved. mostly, so now you should see more updates on the weekly/two weekly basis again! THOUGH i've hit some writers block (Too many ideas! Who knew?) Also... Battlefield 4. That should explain some things.
>_

****Sanghelios, Vadam Keep's Number 3 Spaceport. 09:20 Cycles.**

>Vadam Keep, one of the greatest keeps and most respected in Sanghelios' history and homeland to current Arbiter Thel Vadam. With the breaking of the Covenant decades ago and the Sangheili allying with the Humans the Arbiter had become a sign of change on the planet of warriors. He had pushed for change, fought any who challenged his decision and killed many an assassin who tried for his life. Then, Humanity had offered more aid then it had ever done, humans volunteered to come to Sanghelios, aid them in learning to crew crops and provided them with Security fleets to supplement the Arbiter's own ships.

They provided Huragok to repair and maintain ships, materialsâ€¦ trading posts. Even in the midst of possible civil war Humans had come and did everything they could to aid the weakened Sangheili Empire, and in three years the Arbiter's following had grown more stable as the human's aid secured his hold on Sanghelios.

Now, come forward twenty years and Sanghelios' keeps are now unified more or less under the Arbiter, Thel Vadam, despite his age has yet to be toppled by any assassins. The other keeps who oppose the Arbiter quickly feel under his wing for fear of his many allies moving in and destroying them in his stead. As had been the fates of three other keeps who had tried to resist the Arbiter's camp.

Neither lasted the last decade when they had been destroyed and the survivors executed for the shame of surrendering while their keep burned around them. The three Kaidon's had been clear messages to the others who would oppose Thel.

You join Vadam, or your blood be spilled while your keep burns.

It wasn't the perfect regime by Human standards, many humans attempted to "correct" the political process in the opening years. But Thel had explained to them that it is just the way of Sangheili to rule this way. As regrettable the loss of life was, it was necessary for the Arbiter to unify his people.

And after three years of working on one of three of Vadam's

spaceports, Michelle had seen enough about Sangheili that below the tough martial exterior and brutal devotion to honor lay the beating heart, or hearts, of true warriors.

She sighed softly, leaning back against some crates while running a rag across her damp forehead as she unzipped her work overalls and let them fall down to her waist, exposing her tanned shoulders and arms to the slightly chilled air. Her white tank-top drenched in sweat, making it stick to her form.

"Tough work, huh?" A voice squeaked beside her.

She turned her tired smile to her fellow dock worker and friend, Kapyap was an Unggoy, and like all Unggoy he was short, stubby armed and preferred to be paid in food rations rather than money, since Unggoy were a client race of the Sangheili. Meaning in exchange for work labor and military numbers the Unggoy were offered less restrictions on breeding rights and more rations to be shipped off to their homeworld and five colonies.

The colonies and Unggoy in general didn't have a government but it was generally the way of the Unggoy to join up with Human or Sangheili Operations, mostly as workers for docks or even large malls. Vadam itself employed over two thousand Unggoy in its Military while another three hundred or so in its three spaceports.

Michelle, and the Sangheili, had all been surprised when Humanity, after some years of study with their Sangheili friends, had discovered that for their general size and rather dim wittedness, Unggoy were very adaptable. They could be trained to know a number of dialects, to run certain computing systems and with even more advanced courses repair and maintain weaponry.

That was why Michelle was here, she had come to Sanghelios seven years prior as a volunteer to aid Sangheili doctors in more modern medicinal techniques, even with the stigma against doctors that was still around even today, she had taken medical courses in Sangheili physiology and after four years of aiding three keeps doctors she decided it was time for a change.

She could have left the planet, gone back to UNSC space and become a doctor there, or gone to one of the mixed colonies to be one there. But something about Sanghelios kept her there, she decided for a simple, well rewarded job. A dock worker inside Vadam.

Michelle's first day on the job had beenâ€¦ stressing, for her. She thought she would be treated as an outcast, or some sort of odd burden as one of only two humans in Vadam's spaceports, the other two humans working in the port across the keep.

That was until she met Kapyap, who had approached her and asked if she was, in his words, "The noob", when she responded with it was her first day, he had nodded, told her to follow him and he would give her the "rundown on whole operation". She remembered trying not to laugh as he waddled along pointing things out to her and how to handle certain machinery.

Now, she had muscles where she never used to, she always feltâ€¦ fulfilled after a hard days work and she never thought having Unggoy friends would be so entertaining.

"Yeah," Michelle replied, running a hand through her short blonde hair. Her hair had been longer before, but with the heat of the Vadam Keep she kept it short now. "it's a real scorcher out there today."

"Yup!" Kapyap agreed. "Sun always brutal, but today is justâ€¦ merciless!" he was wearing the standard Unggoy blue worker harness. Its methane tank in the back and his mask on. His arms and legs were exposed. It looked almost like armor, only she knew it wasn't meant for combat and was mostly just fabrics. "You looking forward to weekend?"

Michel nodded, pulling a bottle of water from her rear pocket and taking a deep drink, it was piss warm, but still tasted like the best thing she'd drink all day. "Yeah, thinking maybe I'll travel to Shanxi, I hear its beautiful out there."

"The new colony?" she nodded, Kapyap nodded as well. "I hear same thing, I have cousin who works out there on one of the docks, says temperature is just right for workers like us. Thinking I should get transferred there when I find good time."

"Transferred?" Michelle pouted a bit. "But who will keep me company on breaks?"

"Japjap? Pipp? Kayap?" the Unggoy listed off his fingers. "You have many friends! Besides, me will keep in contact!"

"You better," she grinned and they both broke into a small fit of laughter. After a few moments, the pair decided it was time to get back to work before the next shipping freighter came down and dropped off a whole new load for them to lug around into place. Michelle zipped up her overalls and Kapyap waved before waddling off to his duties inside. She worked outside in the external docks unloading the freighters in the blaring sun. She complained, but it was good work.

Most things coming in from the colonies were often food, fabrics and the occasional shipment of weapons. Those were accompanied by security personnel, and since there wasn't a five by five line up of military geared Sangheili out on the docks today, she guessed there wouldn't be.

She did spot a pair of familiar faces however loading up a few larger crates onto a hoverbed. She walked over as the lean and tall Sangheili lifted a third crate, moved it over and set it atop the bottom two crates. From the markings, they were food rations.

"You need help?" she asked, cocking a brow at them since they didn't seem to notice her approach.

The shorter of the pair lifted his own shoulders and looked up to her. His mandibles twitched in the fashion of a nervous grin while the second merely regarded her with the same level stare he always seemed to have when she was near.

They were Vter and Brus of the Mantekr keep, an ally of Vadam.

They were brothers, with Brus being the oldest by two years and

always calm. Vter was more excitable, well, by Sangheili standards. Most Sangheili preferred military service, but the brothers had apparently decided to be dock workers before they would enlist in the military of their home keep.

"We are fine here, Michelle." Vter replied while standing and turning to Brus. "Is this it?" he asked.

"Yes," Brus nodded. "Take this load inside to the Unggoy, I will prepare the next." He gestured him off.

"Yes, brother." With a bow of his head, Vter took the handle of the loaded hover bed and turned, then dragged it off to the loaded bays and storage where the Unggoy would unload it, then pack it away until the transporters arrived.

When he was out of earshot Michelle raised a brow and asked, "He stillâ€¦ y'know?"

"Infatuated with you?" Brus sighed and hung his head slightly with a sag of his shoulders. "Yes, it is lessening. Thankfully he outgrows this young delusion before I outgrow my patience." he muttered, looking at her now. "It would probably be best if you just outright say you are not interested in such affairs. It would make the process quicker."

"You're the big brother," Michelle grinned. "It's your job to be annoyed by the younger." she stated.

"Besides, he'll outgrow it, he's just fascinated by humans in general, give it a month or two," she shrugged. Vter had been showing an odd amount of interest in Michelle, since she was the only human on the docks where the brothers worked, at first it just seemed general curiosity. Then one day Brus had pulled her aside and informed her his brother had beenâ€¦ explaining things to him that he found herâ€¦ fascinating.

They had both concluded the younger Sangheili had developed a small crush of interest. So, they agreed to stay out of each others way as much as possible, but often times Michelle just enjoyed approaching the pair to gauge Vter's reactions.

She never could have guessed Sangheili could be capable of so many nervous expressions.

"You humansâ€¦" Brus shook his head, walking over to a crate. He glanced over at her, "Help me. If we are going to talk, we may as well get some work done as well."

"Right." Michelle walked over, took the opposite end of the crate and with a grunt and groan of strain she lifted the crate when he did. The crates were heavy and often times lowered down from the freighters. Sometimes they were mixed up, rations with fabrics, and such, so they had to sort them into piles for the sake of convenience.

That and it kept them busy on slow days.

* * *

><p>January 13, 2582. Military Calendar.
UNSC Command Station **_**Atlas**_**, Sol System, Earth. 1800 Hours.

>The clashing of metal sounded out around the large apartment like room as Terrance observed his young protÃ©gÃ© deflect another blow from a sharp thrust of his opponent with a flick of his wrist. The two took two steps back and with a flick of their blades the pair bowed their heads and the opponent walked over to a corner where a series of water bottles and towels were set.

Leonardo walked over to the table where Hood sat and removed the protective headgear that came with the Fleet Admiral's hobby of "Fencing", a dying art that had almost faded near the twenty-three hundreds but was carried on in some of the more remote colonies as a tournament sport.

Terrance watched as the young male wiped the sweat from his brow and inspected the blade for any noteworthy wear, finding none the man sheathed it and set it down, leaning it against the table as he downed a fair amount of water with a sigh.

He took a seat and faced Hood. "What news of the Operation?" he asked finally.

"The _Daedalus_ reports that orbital control has been established, civilian ships are being allowed to leave the planet and the fleet has secured a perimeter in orbit." Hood explained easily as he pulled a flask from his dress uniform and downed a shot of good ol' Earth brewed whiskey. An appreciative sigh later he slid it back beneath his uniform. "The news groundside is different, the enemy is fighting hard and they've dug in deep. Long range coms to the ground teams are down as well so the reports we're getting are mostly Pelicans going down to resupply the troops."

Leonardo appeared thoughtful as he listened to his old mentor speak. His fingers steepled in front of his face as he watched some distant point out of sight. When Hood finished the man nodded. "As I expected," he said. "The enemy who fought us is decisive, smart and quickâ€| this is good. That means the predictions I make for them may be quite accurate."

Hood raised a brow. "Predictions?"

Leonardo nodded. "Yes. From the combat footage, I saw our enemies' spiritsâ€| if you will," he gave a brief smile. "I saw they were resolute, they were determined and ferocious. It showed in their moves, they struck quickly, making the first move by damaging two ships and then finishing off the weakened vessels while maintaining their distance from the more powerful Destroyer." the Fleet Admiral explained to his old mentor. "And it showed as the battle went on. They were a Rapier and struck with precise attacks, weakening, crippling then finishing."

Hood listened to his young protÃ©gÃ© explain what he had seen in the enemy that had attacked their small fleet. It always amazed Hood how Leonardo had a way with explaining things off as a battle of blades. This mentality had existed even before the Fleet Admiral had taken up the hobby of fencing seven years ago. But it got the point across that the Admiral possesses wisdom beyond his years.

Terrance had picked the right man to succeed him.

"I imagine that in the long run, they could very well have severely damaged the Far Away," Leonardo went on, leaning back in his chair and giving a once over of his nicely furbished apartment aboard the Atlas station. "Not win, but the fact one of our more powerful ships could have been damaged alone is enough for me to ask myself questions about our new friends."

"Like what?"

"If they are rapiers," Leonardo said simply, downing some more water. "Who swings their blade? The Commander who lead the enemy formation? Or the higher ranking official above him? Perhaps higher?"

Hood frowned, his apprentice could however sometimes be melodramatic. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm saying, the galaxy is a big placeâ€|" Leonardo spread his arms as if gesturing around the room. "This proves to us that the Forerunner archives are not all knowing, they did not document every species in this vast galaxy, they couldn't have and yet we have said they did and walked out into the darkness without a care." the Fleet Admiral's face grew more grim, determined. "In short. I think its time we started revving up our war machine factories, produce more ships, increase research into Forerunner structures."

Hood blinked in surprise, knowing what the last suggestion implied. "You want to use the Janus keys?" he asked.

"Indeed," Leonardo nodded. "The unchecked caches of Forerunner technology we've left in space since we didn't need them. I think recent events prove we'll need more of an edge to ensure our safety and the safety of those in our care."

"We still don't know enough about the more distant Forerunner constructs, we've already got research stations across the remaining halo rings, we've salvaged what was left of the Arcâ€|" Hood paused, then frowned and sighed. "You want the Capital, is that right?"

Leonardo smiled confident. "Indeed I do, The Janus Keys showed the UNSC every piece of Forerunner technology, the Grand Archives, the Halo arraysâ€| the many temples and cities scattered across the stars. But the keys did not show us the true prize." he sighed softly. "The Forerunner Capitalâ€| all we have are references, but no coordinates. No solid data to indicate where it is, or was." he stood and turned to the viewing window of his room staring down at the Earth. "Our cradle is beautiful, Hoodâ€| but if we are to mature and uphold our new place in this galaxy. We must leave it. Not hover around it as if it were our security blanket."

Terrance sighed, this topic had come up multiple times between them. Leonardo was almost obsessed with finding the Forerunner structure known only as "The Capital", the center of the Forerunner government. Records in the Grand Archives and Absolute Record and various other Forerunner locations all referenced the Capitalâ€| but none gave any real direction of where to find it. The portals are said to lead there but with all the teleportation devices across the Forerunner space it was too dangerous to just send people inside them and prey

they came out inside the intended location and not just in the middle of deep space because the destination in question was destroyed during the Flood-Forerunner war.

But he could also understand the reason for his protégé's fascination. Like many humans he was fascinated by the Forerunners, their culture, their history and technology. The Capital would house all this information for them to find and Leonardo had become quite sure that with some careful planning they could find it and learn all there was to know about those who had chosen Humanity for this great task.

Hood was neutral about the whole thing, naturally. He saw the benefits of finding it, but also the risks. Some records indicated that the Flood had captured the Capital and even after the firing of the Halo arrays there may be flood presence inside the supposedly massive structure that was the Capital. Hell, there were flood in captivity inside the Halo Rings who were being studied. The UNSC had put the flood to the burner and all efforts were made to ensure they were all destroyed.

That had become standard procedure over the last twenty-five years. Forerunner structures would be thoroughly scanned from orbit, then ground teams, often Spartans loaded for anti-flood warfare. Were sent down to secure the structures more thoroughly, any flood presence detected inside the structure from the Spartan teams would be engaged. Normally they were just frozen specimens kept in stasis.

Other times they were loose, somehow they had gotten out and once Hood had seen his own orders to have a planet glassed from orbit to eliminate the infestation. That time they had brought in Sangheili and Kig-Yar fleets to aid in the planetary glassing. The irony of this wasn't lost on many old hands. But the threat of the Flood superseded any old grudges.

The planet had long since been abandoned and would remain that way for the next hundred years. The system itself would remain in a "quarantine" lead by the Sangheili since the system in question was closer to them than it was to the UNSC. The Arbiter had taken this duty seriously since now two hundred ships patrolled the system on alert for any sort of flood infection.

Though Hood doubted they would have to glass any of the other planets in the system, the Sangheili had done so anyways. The whole system was to this day still a bunch of planets reduced to wastelands. They still had an eighty year wait period before terraforming operations could begin.

"Maybe," Hood said, "The Janus keys don't show us the Capital because it has been destroyed?"

"Perhaps," Leonardo relented, turning back to his old mentor and sitting down again with a sudden tired sigh. "Only time will tell."

"But first, we must get a hold of where we stand with this new species." Hood urged, waving his hand dismissively. "You think this show of force will work how you think?"

"Of course," Leonardo replied, energy returned to his posture as he picked up the sheathed Rapier and drew the blade, observing the glinting edge. "It will show them we are not to be trifled with, that we are more than able to take one of their worlds." he paused, "And when we offer them peace. They will understand that we are not brutes. This show of strength must establish we are capable, but understanding. If not, we appear weak and unintelligent."

He sheathed the sword, attached it to his side and lifted his headgear, nodding to his trainer. "And thatâ€|" he slid the headgear on and his voice came back slightly muffled. "Is the last thing humanity needs now."

"Naturally," Hood agreed softly. "But, what are you intending to do about Commander Nero of the _Unseen Dagger_? That nuke wasn't part of the plan." he asked now.

"Oh, I have a few ideas," Leonardo replied, he turned to face his now standing opponent. "I'll probably just have him demoted and reassigned to some patrolling Frigateâ€|" he said dismissively. Truly, Leonardo was a bit more bothered by this then he let on, he didn't like it when orders weren't followed but it was his own fault. He should have done a proper check on the Prowler Commander Nero, which Petrov had done after receiving the report from Lilith.

The Fleet Admiral and his fencing teacher got back to their sparring and Hood stared off into the planet below in a thoughtful silence while the clashing and flashing of metal echoed in the room.

****End of chapter Eight****

****A little more insight into Leonardo's character and thoughts, as I am planning to have him play a large role in the events to come. Thanks to all those who have shown their support and criticisms! You all know the drill, have a nice day/night!****

10. Chapter nine

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Nine****

****Widow System, 2145, 01:00 Cycles. Citadel Calendar.**
>The Citadel, Council chamber. The Council.
****The Citadel, a massive space station of Prothean origin and the single largest artificial constructs known to the Citadel races of the galactic governments. It was from this station that the Citadel council was formed and where it ran the entire civilized galaxy. Made from several species, three main species and the rest being client races. The big three were the Turians, militaristic and in possession of the most powerful fleet in council space. They were strict and demanded order.**

They were the muscle.

Asari, pacifists and long lived. They were the single most advanced race in the council and the first species to discover the Citadel and Mass Relay system. They were wise and peaceful, possessing the smallest fleet of the big three they made up for it by having the

most advanced ships with the most powerful shields. It was because of them the Galaxy united easier.

They were the voice.

The Salarians were the final race of the big three. They were short lived but extremely intelligent, they provided many espionage styled military forces and were more or less in charge of any matters concerning Intelligence gathering inside, and sometimes outside, council space. Naturally agile, they possessed the second largest fleet. They were logic driven, precise and paranoid.

They were the Mind.

And together, the councillors Tevos of the Asari Republics, Quinterus of the Turian Hierarchy and Tala of the Salarian Union composed the current Citadel Council, the ruling figures of entire Citadel and her client races.

And as they gazed down at their consoles watching the video recording of the attack on Falcus. They watched in mixed expressions of surprise, shock and interest as the unknown vessel, large, slow and extremely powerful, took the Turian defense fleet completely by surprise, using unknowns mean to "appear" right at their flank and with a devastating opening salvo of fire carve the fleet to pieces. The leading ship, a massive Dreadnaught of terrifying size, fire a series of smaller cannons mounted along its sides destroy Frigates and Corvettes with single shots before descending to the surface of the planet while dozens more ships appeared and engaged the remaining ships.

The view switched again and this time it was a feed from a survivor Dreadnaught that was moving with the surviving members of the defense fleet around the planet at a safe distance established by the unknown vessels. The Super Dreadnaught and the fleet of smaller ships floated along in orbit over the planet, keeping itself between the planet and the Turian ships.

Primarch Fedoran stood straight, at attention and head held higher than necessary and eyes forward, mandibles twitching in what could only be called nervous. And when the Military leader of the Turian Hierarchy was nervous you understand that the situation back in Palavan Military Command was tense.

The Generals and Commanders of the ground forces and fleets of the Hierarchy hadn't expected such a response from the unknown aliens so quickly, nor the sheer decisive defeat they had suffered in orbit and after much arguing the Primarch had decided that it was for the best of the Hierarchy to cut its losses now and attempt to salvage the Turian's name and request Council aid before they sent in another fleet to attempt to retake the colony.

And not an hour into the meeting did the Primarch feel like he was standing before a board of inquiry and they were now looking over every dark secret he ever hid from public knowledge. He was very nervous. This could very well shame his name, have him removed from office and end with his head on the proverbial chopping block for being the Primarch who lost a battle on Turian soil and space.

The council replayed the video in silence until finally, for the

third time it finished. One of the councillors deemed him worthy of addressing. "This footage is most disturbing," it was Tevos and despite the warm voice she spoke with, he could detect the subtle hint of condescension beneath the warmth. "Why were we not informed of this sooner?" she asked now. Warmth cooling further and bordering on accusation.

The Primarch had no good answer to this, anything he said would burn him one way or another. "Councillors, The Hierarchy didn't understand the threat posed by these unknowns until they had taken Falcus." he explained, then before his words could doom his subordinates back in High Command, he added. "I will take full responsibility!"

"Save us the heroism, Primarch," Tala waved her hand dismissively as the Salarian councillor observed the paused video of the massive dreadnaught, a small click of her tongue then she set it down and looked squarely at him. "You Turiansâ€¦ its one thing to go in fists swinging, but another to go in fists swinging and wearing a blindfold." she scoffed.

"I am more interested in the use of their fission weapon," Tala went on, while disturbing that such a species would use the weapons so close to a garden world, Tala saw the tactical brilliance of its deployment. The detonation had destroyed a hefty number of ships in close proximity and the resulting EMP wave burned out more than half the surviving ships kinetic barriers and internal systems had been sent into such a fray that all auto targeting and navigations had been lost. The blast wave would have also likely dulled before harming the planets atmosphere with lethal bursts of radiation.

"Assuming they meant to leave the planet untouched," she went on. "This species is no stranger to using Nuclear weapons."

"May I remind you, Councillor Tala," Quinterus said from his place to the left of Tevos, his voice just barely above a growl. "That the patrol fleet attempted to hail the unknowns and got no response. These unknowns who had activated a Relay at the edge of the system, in clear violation of our laws. They were had every right to open fire." he paused, then added while turning back to the video. "We just never expected this."

He and her both agreed that the newcomers use of the nuke had been perfect, but he would never agree with her just yet.

"Perhaps now its time for you to consider that maybe shooting everything isn't always the answer," Tala half sneered with a shake of her head. "And if these reports are accurate, they hailed once with a single communication. Have you considered maybe they lacked the proper technology to pick up our form of communications? Or perhaps they were suffering system malfunctions? Or they were composing their response? Your commander, while acting in every right handed to him, certainly didn't waste time flipping the safety off."

"They were provided with the standard forty second wait period, more than enough time to send back a simple greeting for anyone!" Quinterus said, temper flaring and mandibles twitching slightly. "You would have just-"

"Enough!" Tevos raised her voice and both quieted from their bickering as the frowning Asari Matriarch gave them both a small disapproving glare. Tala and Quinterus were both troublesome, in the two and half centuries Tevos had served on the Council and she had seen many a Turian and Salarian councillors be elected, these two had to be most annoying because they bickered about everything.

_Stillâ€| _She thought with some weariness. _At least they haven't declared war upon another yet_. That thought aside, she addressed the issue at hand. "Primarch, your commanding chain will not be brought into question, they made no fault in acting as they did. It was how they were trainedâ€|" she soothed him simply.

For a brief moment, Primarch Fedoran allowed himself some hope.

"The fault is yours." Tevos went on, more coldly. "You kept this from the council, when first contact is made with an unknown species you are to inform us so that we may decide on a peaceful course of action. Instead you began to assemble a defensive fleet and waited until _after_ it had been decimated to inform us." she let the words sink in before continuing. "Leave us, we'll summon you again when we reach a decision. For now, tell your fleet to standby and do not engage the unknowns."

She narrowed her eyes. "Am I clear, Primarch Fedoran?"

"Yes, Councillor." The Turian bowed his head, took two steps back before turning and moving out of the council chamber.

Tevos waited, then when Fedoran was gone she sighed loudly and raised a hand to her head. Feeling a headache coming on.

"What do we plan to do?" Tala asked now, more quietly as if sensing her fellow councillors discomfort.

Quinterus crossed his arms, giving a soft huff. "We should at least take back Falcus, by force or through negotiation the Colony must be secured. Butâ€| knowing _our_ preferred methods," he said "our" with a distinct voice, indicating he meant them alone. Unsurprising really, Tevos knew Turians preferred to be more direct. "Are we going to prepare an envoy?"

That would be the easiest method, Tevos acknowledged. It would save the Turians additional bloodshed and possibly end with these unknowns joining the Citadel council, the technological sharing could result in a massive leap if their ability to form energy portals and travel through them was testament to anything. It would expand their power and with a new race discovered and quickly invited into the folds of the Citadel races it would show the others that they were willing to forgive any misdoings so long as laws are obeyed and amends made.

Naturally, Tala provided a more logic driven response to the suggestion.

"We could allow a joint fleet to the location," she said thoughtfully. At the disbelieving stares from her Asari and Turian compatriots she rolled her large eyes. "Allow me to explain. We take a large fleet of our ships, go to Falcus, not to engage, but to

intimidate. A sign of our power and our cooperation. Show the unknowns there is more life beyond them and before things get bloody, we offer them a chance for peaceful negotiation." she explained. "It would show our ability to unite when we are needed to the other races as well."

Quinterus narrowed his silvery eyes and his mandibles twitched in irritation. Not for the plan itself, but because he agreed with it, it was a good plan, it got to show strength and the councils more reasonable side and in hopefully showing the new race such a large fleet they would understand that a war would be costly and end in only defeat. They would have no choice but to negotiate and become a citadel race or a rogue state and they would be confined to their own systems.

"Iâ€|actually agree with Councillor Tala," he said. And Tevos rounded on him, eyes surprised. He shifted a bit, then gave a mandible twitch before saying. "Shocking. I know."

Tevos stared between them, it figuresâ€| it really did. That when she wanted to just send an envoy, open negotiations and end this as peacefully as possible they would agree to, for all intents and purposes, a show of force without firing a single shot. A military deployment of a joint fleet to cow this fiery new species. _Goddess preserve us_, Tevos thought with another throb of her head, the headache was coming back. But, she was outvoted and so she would have to go along with it.

"Very well, tell the Primach he will have his fleetâ€|" She relented to them. "Contact your Military, Talaâ€| see what they can spare, I will get in contact with Thessia Command," she paused, giving them both hard looks and said. "But be warnedâ€| if this fails, I wouldn't expect to keep your council seats. Am I clear?"

The pair shared a glance. Tevos was a cunning woman, her ascent to Councillor was evidence of that, her position was incredibly stable and she was wise and sympathetic, charismatic and everyone looked up to her as what Asari should strive to be. Understanding, caring and peaceful.

Tala knew better, she had seen Tevos' in moments that showed a more cunning, more methodical woman beneath the smiles and soothing words. She was a planner, a schemer and likely planned moves for the next century or so, and when something didn't go her way she could hide it, but Tala knew she _hated_ when things didn't go to her plan.

Tala knew if this went sour, she would be kicked off the Council and likely shoved under a rug somewhere without so much as an honorable mention in the archives of the Salarian Union. Tevos held such power.

Quinterus just grunted softly. He knew the same as well. So, they were all in more or less agreement for the plan.

* * *

><p>Utopia System. 2148. 02:00 Cycles. Citadel
Calendar.
Turian Colony Falcus, Command Post 7. Commander Desolas
Arterius.

>The dull thud of a punch echoed out inside the poorly lit room, followed by a pain grunt and the spitting of dark red blood.

Desolas Arterius, a Commander with the Turian Hierarchy and, as of General Jerothus' death five cycles ago, Commanding Officer of the local defense force. That was three thousand Turian police officers and at least a hundred Special Response Teams under his command. Desolas wasn't a fool, unlike many of the officers who would have hoarded at the Command Tower, but with it being the jammer keeping enemy ground forces com lines from reaching their ships in orbit, a blessing from the spirits that they were staying up there, the enemy would likely find the jammer and roll on it with extreme force.

Which was Desolas was here in Command Post seven, between the "front lines" and the command tower, running the operations from a position that left him many more combat options and kept him close to the action should he be needed.

And as he felt the weight of the Phaeston mainline Turian assault rifle folded on his back, he felt like he was just a grunt again. He liked it. What he didn't like was the alien currently being interrogated by Sergeant Vrellus, the aging Sergeant punched the alien's unshielded face again and asked the same question.

"Do you understand me?"

Again, the Alien replied in the same odd language and again it was the same message. Too long to be an affirmative. _Butâ€| what did we expect? _Desolas thought as he stared at the alien, who's lip was torn, cheeks bruised and left eye swollen, but man's eyesâ€| they were defiant, hard. A respectable aspect. _We don't know their language and them ours_.

The enemy was also something of a technological wonder. More than a few of his men expressed the shocked awe of seeing such a massive ship fly in atmosphere, it had not only done that but then had launched several single men craft that transported a majority of their shock troopers into the city. A few dozen aircraft were brought down with them, bringing with them more men and even primitive styled motor vehicles with mounted guns.

A few would call those sorts of things primitive. What people failed to realise was that primitive didn't always mean "ineffective", after retrieving a few weapons, some of which were sitting in the main command center in dissembled piles, Desolas realised that when Turians had their own version of gunpowder weapons, they had never used the sort of propellant these unknowns did. Instead of traditional gunpowder they used a sort of chemical mix that provided almost twice the power.

Not to mention the rounds they fired were relatively large calibre. Thankfully Kinetic Barriers were designed for this kind of slug in mind, but enough of these large slugs, especially those fired by their mounted guns and sniper rifles, could shatter the barriers in a low number of shots, but their mainline assault rifles and shotguns would need a bit more punch.

What really stood out however was the lack of Element Zero in the

technology, pods didn't have it, nor did the weapons. In fact Eezo readings taken from the tech read nothing. Their tech didn't rely on Eezo, which was astounding in itself. Such technology, he had to imagine the same could be said for their ships. FTL without Eezo.

The Salarians would love to have a crack at tech samples.

The Sergeant gave a frustrated growl, punched the male again and asked more slowly. "Do. You. Understand me? Nod or shake for yes or no!" He leaned down, sneering into the aliens face as if it were a mentally slow child.

The alien grumbled something, the Sergeant leaned closer and was met when the alien slammed their foreheads together with enough force to knock Vrellus back against the table and the alien sent himself fall back with chair he was cuffed to.

Any other time, Desolas might have laughed at the sheer audacity of the act. But for now, he could see the Sergeant was reaching his self restraint limit for the alien and he stepped into the room, saying. "That will be all for now, Sergeant." He spoke simply, "Get some rations in you and take a team out to patrol to perimeter. The seventh and fifth report shadows are moving out there. I want to know we're locked down tight."

The sergeant grunted, turning to salute Desolas before nodding and moving out the door to fulfill the orders, likely glad to be away from the troublesome alien.

When Vrellus was gone, Desolas turned around and walked over to the fallen alien, caught the kick it sent his way and then moved around, took the chair and set him straight again, going as far as to dust some dirt off his shoulder before moving around to the front of the table.

He grabbed the opposite chair, sat down and stared at the glaring alien a moment, letting it sink in through actions that unlike the Sergeant, Desolas had a great deal more patience. "I know you don't understand me, that's unavoidable unfortunately. But, I do love to try and know about my enemy." he explained, knowing full well the alien couldn't understand a lick of it. "My name," he placed a hand to his chest. "Is Commander Desolas Arterius."

The alien stared a moment, blinking its good eye.

"You?" he tilted his head, gesturing to him now and a pause followed.

The alien began to speak the same line, but said more slowly a piece of it. "Marcus Brant." Desolas heard it, that was an odd name, almost Turian sounding he observed. Well, least they got somewhere, even if it was only names.

"Marcus Brant." Desolas tested the name, it was fairly easy to pronounce it in the aliens strange language, and after a second try, He pointed to the alien. "Marcus Brant." the alien nodded stiffly, satisfied, Desolas patted his own chest. "Desolas Arterius."

"Desolas Arterius." The alien replied in its language, sounding like the name was a bit confusing.

Progress, no matter how small, should be celebrated. And Desolas was willing to take a small drink to this when he was done. But for now, he had a small scale war to fight, a defense force to organize and civilians to be evacuated, if the surviving fleet commanders reports were accurate they were allowing civilian ships leave once they reached a certain altitude. Another blessing from the spirits since the shelters were a bit crowded as it was.

He blinked, suddenly realizing how he could deal with this little language barrier between them. If he recalled there were several dozen Asari officers here in the city, just one of them could perform a Meld and allow their languages to be learned in moments, she could then pass it on to Desolas.

"Spiritsâ€|" He raised his talons to his forehead, feeling like he was a fool. "I'm denseâ€|" he stood, looking to Marcus Brant, he turned and marched out, closing the door behind him. He had to find himself an Asari.

And he knew just who to trust with this simple, but vital task. "Saren?" he spoke into the com to his younger brother. "You still alive, Sergeant?"

A pause, a burst of gunfire and a muffled shout of "_Incoming_!" before the dull crack of a grenade going off. Then, came the flanging voice of his sibling. "_I'm alive, Commander-" _a hissed curse. _"The enemy is pounding our position on the left flank, air support is too caught up in dog fights overhead to be of use. Their mobile turret vehicles are strafing our barricadesâ€|"If you can spare some reinforcements, I'd appreciate it_."

Desolas didn't overly fear for his younger brother's life, he could tell from the way Saren spoke that despite the dire sounding situation his little brother had the situation under control. "I actually need to pull you from that location, I need an Asari, we've captured one of the hostile aliens and we've hit a bit of a barrierâ€|" he trailed off when a prolonged series of cracks muffled out over the com.

A pause, then. "_Understood, Commander_," was the grudging reply.

Saren probably thought he was pulling out the younger for his safety, but that wasn't it, Desolas didn't trust anyone else to get an Asari alone. And he didn't want to pull any full squad away. Saren was talented, more talented than Desolas if he could just learn to reign in his more haughtier attitude.

Still, Desolas was sure Saren would learn. Afterall, excellence ran in the Arterius bloodline and it showed that in the seven generations they've served in the military, their line started with Sergeant Canus Arterius who had risen to Primarch of Palavan, essentially commander of the entire of Turian Hierarchy Military. From then, only the best was expected from the Arterius line.

And they delivered, for the last six generations they had delivered glory onto their name. Now it was Desolas and Saren's turns to step

up to the monumental task of continuing the family tradition. Saren was young, still plenty of time to prove himself.

Desolas on the other hand, this invasion by the enemy forces currently tangling with his forces across the city and outlining military outposts, this was his chance to ascend high on the ladder, ambition was fine in Turian society so long as you knew your limits. Desolas was well aware of his own limits and as he commanded forces around him with the practiced ease of a General, he guessed his next promotion would be to a General.

"Commander!" one of his sergeants rushed into the command post, panting for breath and collecting himself as Desolas turned to face him with an expression of "yes?" on his plated face. "Enemy forces are overwhelming Posts nine and five, communications has been lost at both at both sites, but runners sent show they will collapse if they're not reinforced!"

Desolas frowned, mandibles twitching. That wasn't good, if they broke through those two posts they'd have the least resistance and straightest shot for the central command tower and the bulk of the civilian population still awaiting assignment to some of the other shelters that weren't crowded. That said, it presented a rare opportunity to bury the enemy assaults.

"Civilians in these sectors are clear, correct?" he asked the sergeant, bringing up the tactical map.

The sergeants eyes moved over the map's highlighted areas. "Yes, sir."

"Plant demolition charges across the supports of these two buildings, get infiltrators hereâ€¦" he tapped a part and another of the map. "And here. Shoot the vehicles, force them to group together behind their vehicles for cover."

"Sirâ€¦ are you suggesting we blow the buildings to bury them?"

"We've been using conventional tactics and they've succeeded in pushing us back." Desolas replied simply. "Without pulling out some new tricks the enemy will just back us into a corner. And the central jammer cannot fall or they re-establish communications with their ships in orbit." he turned to the sergeant. "Now, get to it, I'll send a runner to post five to get my orders there."

"Sir!" the Turian saluted, turned and moved out of the command center. His various officers gave him weird looks.

Desolas ignored them. Playing with "by the book" tactics only got you so far in a situation where the enemy adapted to your tactics and moved around them would only end in losing. These newcomers needed to be stalled until reinforcements could make it to reinforce the colony and push them back.

Now, all he needed do is wait for Saren to bring an Asari in.

* * *

><p>January 13, 2582. Military Calendar.
ODST 22nd

Regiment, Team Delta-7. Unknown Race colony. 1400 Hours.

>John slipped between two shadows, the armor plates on his armor shifting to match the landscape then darkening when he dipped back into the shadow of the civilian vehicle that was parked near the perimeter of the central tower. It had been a few close calls and just getting to the tower itself, even with the two advance forces launching assaults and splitting the focus of enemy defenders. But, they had gotten here without much trouble.

Now came the really hard part. Getting inside that tower and taking out the jammer and get coms back up with the orbiting fleet. Landing zones had been cleared, but they couldn't contact any of the other drop locations, did they take their objectives? Or fail?

But, the now and here was more problematic, the central tower courtyard was flooded with civilians and soldiers patrolled along the perimeter in teams of five, each was alert and looked ready to fire at the first whisper of trouble. Add to the dozen spot lights and snipers posted across the surrounding buildings, they'd be getting inside in cuffs or body bags with all the security these guys put up.

That, and they were two men short. Captain MacMillan had stayed at the FOB to keep local forces organized and the attacks moving well and the Lieutenant was nowhere to be found, either KIA, WIA or Captured. So, it fell onto Sergeant Sanderson, or Wrecker, to lead Delta-7 on this job.

"Right," Wrecker muttered as he shook his head at the security the enemy was putting up. "We're not getting in there unseen unless we can teleport." seeing no one had any hands raised to promote this ability, he concluded. "Thought so. Ideas?"

John observed the various civilians and soldiers around the area, there was too many of them to get close to the tower without a major fight and they'd be heavily outnumbered and captured, or killed, for sure. So, how could they get inside without exposing themselves?

He spied a few of those transports, their mounted guns seemed to fire two types of rounds, small, fully automatic bursts of fire and a single, large explosive shot. Amazing the gun could switch modes like that on the fly, it was being repaired and the two technicians minding it were relatively out of the way with only four soldiers patrolling their area in semi-lax patrol patterns.

If they could secure that transports turret, maybe have someone provide a distraction with it? No, that wouldn't work, the person they'd send would certainly be shot down before doing anything too serious and they'd never get to the thing without being spotted, even with AvCam.

He peered up at the tower, windows here and there across the various floors—he looked over to his team, then back up to the building. "Do we have grapple gear?" he asked Wrecker.

The Sergeant rounded on him, nodding. "Of course we do," he replied, then cocked his head to the side. "What you thinking?"

"That jammer needs to go down, so, I say two of us move into a closer

position by the tower, use the grappling gear when the other two make a big enough fuss out here, draw their eyes and do some damage." he explained, gesturing to the tower. "If you're curious, I volunteer to be the distraction."

Wrecker looked ahead, then to the building and back at Shepard, then he frowned and said. "Alright," he nodded with a grim sort of air. "Me and Sharps will make the climb up, Ares," he looked to the Corporal, "You and Shepard stay back here, make a huge mess of the place." he paused, then said. "Any complaints?"

"Not a one." Gerald replied, flexing his arms and gripping his MA6K a bit more.

John didn't have any either, since he volunteered.

"Good, nowâ€¦ I'll send you both the signal, when I do, take that tank thing, and go to town with it." Wrecker paused, then said. "Good luck."

"Sir," Shepard and Ares nodded, their weapons raised a bit in their tightening holds. They would get this done or die trying, which they very well could.

"Here we go," The sergeant and sniper nodded, their camoplates activated and soon only their undersuits could be seen, they moved forward when Shepard gave the signal to go. They moved behind a Turian patrol five meters ahead, soundless as a pair of mice, they slid behind another pair of soldiers who were standing at attention, heads moving side to side to scan the area.

As they stealthed, Shepard and Ares waited until they were close enough to perimeter wall, when they were, Shepard muttered. "Figures, first op with the team and I'm going to die," he shook his head.

Ares chuckled behind his helmet, looking to Shepard. "Welcome to the Helljumpers, would you like a T-shirt?" he replied, voice deeper than any of the others on the team. "Don't worry, Shepard. I got your back." he butted Shepard's shoulder with his own. "Nowâ€¦ lets go wreak some havoc, right?"

Shepard stared. He nodded, "Yeah,.." he smiled behind his visor. "Lets."

"One," Ares said, cracking his neck.

"Two," Shepard took a breath.

"Three!"

They turned from their cover, weapons raised to the nearest pair of enemy soldiers, who upon seeing the two black clad ODSTs raised their weapons and let loose a burst of rounds that pinged off their shielding as the ODSTs own rounds pinged off theirs. But, Shepard and Ares closed the distance, their Hard-Light blades came to life and with a pair of thrusts they jammed the blade into the enemies chest cavities, turning the bodies to the engineers who opened fire with their own weapons, letting the shield units on the body absorb the punishment.

Ares tossed his body shield aside and raised gripped the M90 CAWS shotgun off his back and brought it up, generally it took two rounds to break down the enemy shieldsâ€| however, that wasn't what he wanted to do right now.

The roar of the weapon and the slugs slammed into the enemies kinetic barrier with enough force to knock the thing against the transports side. His buddy turned to fire on Ares, Shepard reacted, he brought his weapon, took time to aim and fired a burst.

The enemies weapon sparked and fragments exploded from the front, the rounds had found their mark, the front of the weapon that was outside their barrier envelope. Now weapon less the soldier reached for a small sidearm at his side. Drew it halfway before Shepard tackled him against the side of the transport.

They wrestled for the alien weapon, the handgun by the looks of it, Shepard gripped its hand, pointing away from him, and as a third soldier turned the corner of the transport to investigate, Shepard jerked the gun towards him and fired, forcing the weapon to discharge several rounds and forcing the soldier to take cover. He drew his M6H and shoved it to the side of the alien's helmeted head.

"Eat this." Shepard growled and pulled the trigger twice. Gore splattered the ground and the grip on the unknown pistol slackened. He took them both and fired suppressing shots to the one in cover.

Ares executed the one he had blown back with a point blank blast to the chest before slipping inside the tank. A muffled, "Jesus its cramped in here!" came out, and then, a moment later the turret began to rotate. "Thank god these controls are simple!"

Shepard didn't reply, instead he discarded the alien weapon and brought his MA6K to bear, soonâ€| they were the center of attention. "Whatever! Open fire!" he jumped into the transport as well when five more alien troopers began to pour fire on his position, he fired blindly out the hatch, the rounds pinging off the shields uselessly.

"Just because they're simple doesn't mean I know how to shoot it yet!" Ares replied, the turret twisted to face the incoming troopers, who upon seeing the main gun aim at them scattered and broke for cover. Ares tracked one, fumbled with the controls and then when he pressed the two buttons on the turning sticks he frowned. "The hell do you shoot this thing?"

"Stop pressing both buttons!" Shepard yelled, more weapons fire as the aliens realised the two inside their tank had no freaking clue how to work it. "One at a time!"

"How do you know?"

"Because pressing both isn't working!"

Ares pressed the left button. A powerful rumble above their heads was heard and then on the targeting screen one of the troopers who had broken cover to try and toss an explosive exploded in a mess of gore from an explosive slug. "Woo!" Ares grinned, and then pressed the

right button. The turret opened fire with a hail of slugs that he strafed the other aliens with, forcing them down behind various covers.

A rocket from one of the guard positions on a rooftop streak by, striking the side of the transport. Warning sounded out, or they assumed they were warnings. "Light up that bastard!" Shepard said, tapping a key beside the hatch and it slid closed. He moved up through the cramped vehicle and into the cockpit. He sat down, looking at the controls, various buttons and he frowned. "â€|Damn. Whatever." he gripped the two sticks, each had two triggers and a button where the thumb would be.

"â€|God, these aliens!" Shepard muttered.

He gripped the sticks, another rocket was soon inbound and he pressed the triggers, hoping they were the go command. Instead? The transport lifted up as four miniature thrusters burst to life and took it three meters off the ground, the rocket whipped by and exploded on the ground.

The transport landed. "Huhâ€|" Shepard moved the sticks forward, nothing. He pressed the thumb buttons, the vehicle stuttered forward and then took off when he released the right one, which he assumed was the breaks. The viewing window was odd, there was no windowâ€| just a holographic display. Which wasn't working.

"Guess that's what they were fixing." Shepard muttered.

He turned both sticks and the vehicle jerked roughly to the side. "Manâ€| we must look stupid right now!" Ares laughed, the turret roaring out above them as he fired into the enemy soldiers. "Rocket! Jump!"

Shepard squeezed the triggers and again they "hopped" over the rocket. "Whoo!" Shepard grinned behind his visor. "You're gonna have to tell me if we're about to-" a thud against the hull, then another. "Hit something?"

"Hah! You ran two down!" Ares cheered. "We have like twenty of them raining fire down on us from the roof tops! Shepard! Get us out of here!"

"I can't see anything!" Shepard replied, turning the sticks and moving forward. "These aliens don't use windows! They use holo displays!" he added in frustration. He really hoped Wrecker and Sharps were on their way up so they could complete the mission and not see how stupid this plan really was.

"Missile!"

"Hopping!"

The transport hopped over the first missileâ€| then the other two struck it side and blew a sizeable hole in the side of the hull and tipped the vehicle onto its side, making Shepard and Ares grit their teeth.

"Right us!"

"Righting!" Shepard squeezed the triggers and the jets on the side of the vehicle they were laid on fired up and propelled the vehicle onto its wheels again. "Righted!"

"Five ahead, run em down!" Ares turned the turret to a rocket launcher on the roof that hit them. He fired with the main gun, exploding him like the first. "Boom."

The vehicle jerked forward and the alien soldiers moved to the side to avoid being run over by the blind transport. Shepard moved along, he couldn't believe this was working! The vehicle suddenly jerked and flipped over when another one of its kind rammed into its side, flipping them twice and making the occupants jostle around inside it. When it slowed onto its back, Shepard groaned and Ares muttered a curse.

"I think I broke my arm!" Shepard said, a sharp pain in his shoulder whenever he moved it shot through him. "Ares status?"

"I'm fine," Ares got to his knee and handed Shepard his dropped M6H. "They're going to try and pry us out of here. Lets give them hell for it." they shared a nod and Shepard gripped his MA6K in his good arm, and his M6H in his bad. He raised them to the hole created by the pair of rockets.

Ares covered the loose hatch with his M90. Together, they waited for an enemy to present themselves.

A series of rumbles beneath them and the tell-tale sound of explosions made them pause to listen. They were distant, too far to be explosive charges set up by the two inside the tower. They frowned and looked to each other.

Then a third series of explosions.

Their coms crackled. "_This is Captain MacMillan of the 22 Orbital Drop Shock Trooper regiment. Lance one and two, do you copy me? Come back Damnit_" the Captain's voice said. "I repeat, lance one and two, if you are receiving, respond!"

"_The detonated the buildings! Our hogs are buried! We're in deep_"

"_Enemy squads advancing on our positions_"

"_We need immediate reinforcements_"

"_Die! Just fucking die_"

Gunfire, panicked reports and curses erupted over the long range com lines and soon, the pair realised the third set of explosions had been the jammer. Lance one and two stalled? Buried? They had demo'd buildings to bury the advance forces? Clever bastards.

"_Captain_" came the Sergeant's voice. "_Boys, we've got long range communications going! Tell the boys upstairs we need some serious firepower_"

"_This is Lieutenant Calson, we've taken over Military installation four, we have wounded and prisoners. Requesting further orders_."

"_Pelicans Echo Nine Seven, Five Nine and Delta Five Five on standby, anyone out there need some air support_?"

A sensual chuckle over the com lines, reminding Shepard of his last girlfriend when she wanted to get something from him. "_This is UNSC AI Lilith, I hear you men and women, _Daedalus_ is in orbit and ready to assist, glad to hear from you." _she purred. _"I have several Pelicans with Scorpions loaded for transport and more than a few Vultures prepped to descend down to ground for support_." She paused. "_Good work, we're sending down the cavalry_."

"_The enemy is about to be beaten into a corner_." she laughed a bit. "_Hope you're all ready for round two_."

"I know I am," Ares chuckled. Then, an explosive rolled into the transport. "â€|Aw shit."

It exploded and Shepard was thrown to the back of the vehicle by the force, his shields sputtered and faded, warnings pinged on his HUD and he coughed, across the vehicle Ares lay prone, armor smoking. "Ares!" he called.

The man didn't move. Two aliens came insode through the hole, they saw Shepard and aimed, but didn't fire. Shepard saw his weapons laying off to the side. He didn't reach for them. They came closer, and he chuckled, they paused.

"You two surrender now," Shepard said as he tasted copper. "I won't have to kick your asses." One gutshot him with the butt of his rifle, the other grabbed his doubled over body and dragged him from the wreck while his partner pulled out the immobile Ares.

****End of Chapter Nine****

****There's chapter nine! Sorry for the long wait, I've recently been experiencing writers block and now i'm rethinking future chapters in favor of massive rewrites to them, soooo, yeah! Sorry. Anyways, enjoy the new chapter and have a nice day/night!****

11. Chapter ten

****Chapter ten****

****January 14, 2582. Military Calendar.
>ODST 22nd Regiment, Team Delta-7. Unknown location. 0400
Hours.
"Y'know what I _love,_ Shepard?"

John groaned for the fifth time that hour, his rib was broken and he was sure one of his ears was deafâ€| sadly it wasn't the one that the teams sniper was currently bitching into and had been bitching into for what felt like five hours instead of the actual thirty minutes. Evidently Sharps loved talking when she was a POW, who knew?

"I love being a POW, by _aliens_ no less!" she said, sarcasm thick. "I _love_ being tied to a goddamn chair and subjected to questions I

can't even understand!" she went on.

"Why couldn't I be celled with Wrecker?" John said, wincing when he felt his broken rib move in a way he didn't like one bit.

After their capture at the Jamming tower, Shepard and the team had been taken to a command post, likely to be interrogated for information, and had been prisoners of war for—oh, give or take twelve hours, and for half that time they had been questioned by aliens who didn't understand them nor other way around, so interrogations pretty much consisted of the team going in one at a time and spouting random BS at their interrogators for kicks.

And since the interrogation chamber and holding cells were all connected via one way mirrors, they were able to see who was being interrogated, hear it too, but not see their fellow detainees. Right now? It was Wrecker's turn.

****Smack!****

Wrecker's head snapped to the side, lip torn, blood leaking down his chin to drop onto his undersuit, his armor plating had been removed when he woke up. He chuckled, righting his head again and looking at his steroid abusing Kig-Yar look-a-like. "Bet you fist your mother that way too." he laughed.

It was a blatant sound of amusement and it seemed that if the Aliens had taken anything from he interrogations, is that when the ODSTs laughed in an interrogation, it was a joke that had been said.

Another punch, the chair in which Wrecker was secured fell over with the man still in it. He coughed a bit, spat out blood and tested his jaw, satisfied it wasn't broken he turned and stared right back at his questionee. "Punch—punch me if you ever boned your species version of a dog before. Eh?" he chuckled.

Punch.

Shepard winced at that one, somehow he felt that by the time these aliens learned the human language they'd have a long list of insults to speak with—and what a list it was. He ignored Wrecker's shout of "Take my goddamn jaw off you limp-wristed pus-" and the resulting punches. Wrecker was mad as a hatter and Shepard didn't feel like listening to him torture himself anymore.

"So, Sharps, still bitchy?"

"Nah—Wrecker's killing that mood—oddly though I'm a bit aroused."

"—Really?" Shepard didn't know how to feel about that.

"Don't get hopeful, kid. I have a husband."

"Ah well, can't blame a man for trying." Shepard chuckled, ahh, the teasing in light of the situation. He knew it was all in good fun of course, they just needed to kill time until something good or bad happened. Good being their rescue, bad being their execution.

"I suppose not," Sharps agreed. "So, what do you think they're learning from all this? Y'know, sides a list of insults that could turn sailors red." she snickered.

"Honestly? That every ODST is a little messed up in the head."

They shared a laugh of agreement for that particular statement. That is the only thing that could explain what propelled Wrecker into a cackling fit as he was punched in the gut and tossed to the floor again.

And then a thunderous boom shook the building around them for a moment before finally the walls stilled and even the interrogator seemed surprised, his frustration replaced by surprise before alarms blared across the cells and halls. Another, closer rumble of thunder shook the ODSTs in their chairs.

"Cavalry?" Shepard probed.

"My money's on-" Sharps began when the door to the interrogation cells opened and in came three of the unknown aliens, two dressed like regular grunts while the third they had come to know was the base commander, Desolas Arterius was his name. Least that's what the Lieutenant said when they got here and found themselves sharing space with their missing LT. Would have been fist bumps and cheers all around if it hadn't been for the fact they were chained up, oh and POWs. "Yeah." Sharps finished.

Desolas stepped into the main chamber, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture that made the interrogator stop, reach for a weapon and be stopped by the Commander, who shook his head. They conversed in their language before the interrogator nodded stiffly, his posture was grudging but unwilling to directly question his superior's orders.

The Commander moved over to the cell consoles, he typed in a few commands and then they found their bonds clattering to the floor. Hands freed, the stood, looking at the windows as Desolas stepped towards the now standing Wrecker, a gun in hand. The ODST looking tense, beaten and ready to strike like a coiled cobra if the Commander tried anything.

They couldn't do anything, they were unbound by still in their cells, Wrecker was against four hostiles, unarmed. Desolas approached, fingers flexing on the handle of his handgun, before finally, he turned it over in his hand, raised his arm and held it out to Wrecker grip first with, what they could assume was a straight face. Wrecker looked confused, but took the weapon anyway, raising it slightly.

The alien Commander stepped back, gestured to the others to lower their weapons. Which they did, albeit more grudging than the Commander had, Desolas turned back to the console, tapped another key and their cells opened. They stepped into the main chamber, moving to the aliens, Sharps reached down, grabbing one of their strange weapons, thankfully it was unfolded. She tossed one of the unfolded ones to Shepard, who caught it and kept it trained on the two who had dropped their own.

The Lieutenant stepped out, took the Interrogators weapon, and

gestured him to stand alongside Desolas, as did the other two. The four stood side by side, varying expressions. Except Desolas, who instead stared at them with a mild regret, begrudging respect and a little ire. "What the hell is going on, you think?" Sharps whispered to Shepard, who provided security by the door.

"Not a clue, wish we had our radios." Shepard replied honestly. All they had were their ODS uniforms. Their armor and weapons had been confiscated and were likely held elsewhere. Another explosion rocked the building before the doors parted and Shepard raised his weapon in reaction.

He lowered it again when he saw the familiar faceplates of fellow ODSs and marines staring back at them with their MA6s ready to fill him with lead. "What took you guys so long?" Shepard cracked a grin, two teeth missing.

"Sorry, traffic was murder," the other ODS replied without missing a beat as they stepped inside, seeing the four aliens, he nodded for the marines to secure them while he addressed Delta-7. "Sorry it took awhile to get here. A few things have happened in the last five hours and we just now got word of your locations." he explained to the gathered team. "Your Captain will be pleased to see you're all fine." he paused.

"More or less." they could hear the smirk in his words.

"Cheeky bastard." The Lieutenant shook his head, and the team shared a chuckle. "Right, well, what's happened in the last five hours?" he asked now.

* * *

><p>January 14, 2582. Military Calendar.
UNSC
Infinity****-Class Command Ship **_**Daedalus**_**, Unknown
system. 0100 Hours. [Three hours earlier.]

>Klaxons blared across the deck, giving Lasky a small headache as he sat in his command chair, listening to his bridge crew chatter and filter him reports on what was going on. But he could see clearly what was going on, and frankly he was relieved. About time they received their desired response, he was beginning to think he'd have to keep his men here for a month. On screen almost three hundred ships drifted towards his battle group, in formation, larger ships pods of smaller ones. Some were different in design, which suggested either different species or manufacturer. Perhaps purpose? Lasky stared at their gathered numbers.

"Lilith, distance to enemy fleet?" The Admiral asked.

"Distance is forty-five thousand and steadily approaching, They will be within optimal firing range inâ€¦" The sultry AI's avatar appeared, and she crossed her arms over her chest and looked thoughtful for a moment. "Two minutes. Vectors are offensive formations and sensors indicate their weapons are live."

Lasky suspected as much, three hundred ships to his several dozen, huh? He didn't like those odds in a straight fight. But this wasn't a straight fight, not at all. This was a trap and they were being sprung into it. "Send out the word to the Sangheili fleet. Tell them we are ready to pull our ace out of the sleeve." he ordered her, not

tearing his eyes away from the display.

"Aye, Admiral," Lilith nodded. "Their estimated time of arrival is five minutes." she informed him, glancing at the screen even though she didn't need to. "Think you can stall them for three minutes?"

"Lilith, I'm Captain of the most powerful warship the UNSC ever produced, I have a fleet that's a mixture of old and new ships, half of my older models are crippled and we're currently split into three smaller fleets." Lasky paused in his speech, then nodded. "Yeah, I think this old man can do three minutes."

Lilith smirked invitingly. "Oh how I love your confidence, Admiral Just make my code all tingly." her face then went impassive, "We're being hailed and enemy formations are slowing, now stopping at the eighteen thousand distance marker." she blinked, "Cocky bunch now that they have numbers, huh?"

"Yeah, well, they think they've got this. And they probably would," Lasky admitted. "Well, establish connection. Keep firewalls up, be ready for anything. Order all ships to combat alert status alpha, warm the particle cannons and tell our fleets to be ready to make a retreat in case things turn ugly."

Lilith raised a brow. "I thought you were confident you could stall three minutes?"

"I am, but I can't predict everything, can I?" Lasky shook his head, stood and stepped forward, looking at the forward view screen. A moment passed, then it flickered and on screen appeared, what he assumed to be, the enemy flagships command deck. And what surprised him was the alien who stood there, expectant as he was.

Her, least, he assumed it was a her, skin was blue, and instead of hair, she had tentacles. Besides that, she appeared quite humanoid in appearance. Her uniform suggested she was the commander of the fleet he was now facing down. Her stance mirror his own almost perfectly, both knew their positions, both were confident in their gameplan and they were sure of their troops.

He already respected her.

"We're receiving a data ping. Looks like they're trying to send us a data packet," Lilith informed him from her place, finger idly tapping her lip. "Should I accept?"

"Do so." Lasky didn't break his eyes away from the commanding alien. A moment passed, twoâ€¦ three. "Lilith?"

"Package secure, clean, Admiral, appears to be a translation package, probably for their language. Running itâ€¦ now." Lilith said. "Alright, first contact through verbiage is a go."

"My name is Admiral Thomas Lasky of the UNSC _Infinity-Class flagship_ _Daedalus_," Lasky began, and the alien visibly tensed and then relaxed at his words. Good, so, she could understand him. "I am in command of this battlegroup." he informed her curtly, bowing his head. "Can you understand me?"

"Yes," her voice surprised him, it sounded human as well, sultry, but curt, inviting, but guarded. Hopeful, but resolute. Her tone held a lot, it seemed. "Admiral, I am General Lethanias Endarys, Captain of the Destiny Ascension and Commander of this fleet. I am here on behalf of the Citadel council, the ruling body of this part of the galaxy." she replied with just as much courtesy. "We are pleased you accepted our communications." she added.

_Not as pleased as I am, _Lasky thought with an almost frown. Citadel Council, ruling body? So, there was another collection of aliens then. Like the Covenant, except these ones didn't seem nearly as hostile, and were willing to talk. Judging by the size of the fleet, he was willing to bet they were hoping to cow him and his men into surrender. Nice tryâ€¦ but the UNSC had already thought of that move themselves.

"General Endarys," she nodded, "It's no trouble. I'm to understand you represent thisâ€¦ council, and since you're not sending my fleet to oblivion I guess that means this is the part where you politely ask me to stand down or I forfeit my men's lives?" she raised a brow, but her eyes shone with an amused glint. Bingo.

"That is correct, Admiral. If you do not cease all hostilities and withdraw your troops from the surface of the colony, my fleet and I will be forced to attack." Endarys relayed, crossing her arms. "It would behove you to accept this. If you do so, we will not open fire and we can begin making more proper communications between our two governments. The council only wants this to end peacefully without any more bloodshed."

Lasky almost sighed in relief. So, this council believed in diplomacy. That was good, that was very good. All the better then. "I thank you for the generous terms, as it stands my government would like nothing more to settle this peacefully. But, when we were fired upon without so much as a warning, I'm afraid that became impossible." he informed her, looking serious.

"Without warning? That's quite the serious accusation." Endarys said with a frown. It amazed Lasky how similar her and human expressions were. "Do you have proof of this?"

"Ship logs indicated no transmissions received. But, there might have been reason for it, interference at the time with our communications and sensors equipment." Lasky explained, frowning a bit. "So, not proof. But its all we have. I think I speak for a great of both our sides that we wouldn't rather be here."

Sympathy passed through her eyes before they hardened into professionalism. "If we can end this diplomatically, then we would be willing to allow one of your ships, preferably a frigate, to be escorted closer to ours where we will meet with an envoy to discuss peace terms between us. However, before any of that can happen." she began. "You must put down your arms, bring your troops off the colony and hold position at the designated coordinates."

A ping, and an area was highlighted on the TacMap. Lasky looked at it, away from the planet, out of weapons range. A nice spot as any in this situation. "We will then keep your fleet here until we receive clearance from the council that the terms have been made you will be free to go." she finished as his glance ended.

He considered his next words, and Lilith's timer read a minute and twenty seconds left before the Sangheili fleet arrived. "You have an envoy ready?" she nodded. "I see, I'm sorry to say but our diplomatic corps isn't here, we were just sent to occupy this planet and await a response so we can open lines of communication and put an end to hostilities." he gave a short laugh, "Guess we should have brought one now, huh?"

Forty-nine seconds.

"Maybe." Endarys agreed. "Now, Admiral, what is your reply to our conditions?"

Lasky sighed, counting off a few seconds before he looked up at his alien counterpart. "General Endarys, while I am humbled and grateful for your offer of peace and the fairness of your terms. It's more than humanity has gotten before, I must however make you a counter offer," he said, tone grim. And her expression turned into one just as grim as his own. "My counter offer is this, you and your fleet stand down now."

Ten seconds.

"And I will not be forced to make this end any messier." Five seconds. "So, here are my terms. You power down your shields and weapons, maintain your positions and send your envoy out, we will meet them aboard my ship and we can begin discussions for peace."

Lasky paused. Zero seconds.

And on cue with perfect precision, several dozen slipspace ruptures opened up behind the enemy fleet, and on the screen he saw Endarys shouting orders as their own alarms sounded off. And then, here came the Sangheili. One hundred and twenty-two ships began to leave the portals, Supercarriers, CCS-Class battle cruisers, at least thirty of the behemoth like ships appeared, dwarfing their CCS-Class counterparts. Dozens of Frigates and cruisers appeared as well. Weapons warmed, their lateral lines heated, but didn't fire. Their large, bulbous hulls appearing more marine mammal than ship, greens and silver in color. Like a school of whales they lumbered into three perfect formations behind the enemy fleet to create the perfect kill zone.

"Or our allies at your flank will open fire along with my own fleet," Lasky said with a smile that drew Endarys' attention back to him.

"Soâ€|" he said offhandedly. "Will those terms work for you?"

The bridge crew had the professionalism not to outright chuckle at the enemy general's expression of shock.

****End of chapter ten****

12. Chapter eleven

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter eleven****

****January 14, 2582. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC Central Command Station _**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 2000 Hours.

>The UNSC and civilian council were again meeting to discuss the recent events taking place on the front of the UNSC's expansion efforts across the relay, and again Leonardo found himself seated amongst the dozen or so individuals of the most powerful overweening bodies of both the civilian and military corps. And again, as he stared out across the two groups while they discussed in whispers with their neighbours, he found himself made wholly aware this was humanity united, they were strong, trusting. But cautious and devious. He couldn't have been happier to be chosen to lead such a faction since Hood himself had taken a personal interest in his studies and became his mentor.

"My fellow Committee members," the Fleet Admiral of the UNSC, Leonardo began. "It seems our little plot has worked perfectly. As of sixteen hours ago the fleet sent this Citadel Council to retake their colony from our own has surrendered and negotiations have been underway for awhile, I expected we'll be arriving at end of our negotiations soon enough and now comes the most pleasant part of this affair." he clasped his hands together in a small clap, and on cue Majestic appeared.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral?" the angelic avatar addressed Leonardo.

"It's time for some show and tell, did you prepare the files as I asked?" Leonardo raised a brow. Majestic nodded, "Good! Alright, my fellow committee members, what we're all about to see is a data file made up of various articles from a galactic guide, as it were. Called by the Citadel council the Codex. This information isn't classified and we plan to go public with this information before tomorrow is over." Leonardo paused when an agent from ONI Section II stood. "Decisions been made, no point in lying to our public about this species. They've been waiting as patiently as us. We should reward them at least this. So, Sit. Down."

The spook opened his mouth, but sat down and sighed. He couldn't overrule the Fleet Admiral, not unless he had the entire committee to his back, and given ONI's reputation, he wouldn't be able to and Leonardo knew it.

"Majestic, proceed with the presentation," Leonardo nodded to the AI.

"At once, Fleet Admiral." Majestic bowed his head, and his angelic wings spread outwards then his image flickered and faded into a display.

While the presentation was played, Micheal and his fellow ONI counterpart beside him whispered to one another. "Petrov just loves overstepping us, huh?" Micheal grunted, displeased by the fact that the Fleet Admiral had made the decision himself to just disclose information about the aliens to the public without the approval, or advice, of ONI, the very division in charge of Intelligence! Why have an Intelligence division if you didn't use its expertise?

Still, Micheal knew they had nothing here. As Fleet Admiral, Leonardo held the deck and did the shuffling. Even ONI couldn't do anything about this decision sides suck it up and live with it, not while Leonardo was so well received by the committee and military brass alike. His character and personality were very well saving from a political, or literal, bullet to the head in this case.

"Yeah," His fellow spook whispered. "He does."

"Gets on my nerves." Micheal added, resisting the urge to rub his temples in irritation.

"You seen your wife yet?"

"No, that's the worst part, since this whole fiasco started her ship is deployed and I'm here with you Liaoning between ONI and the brass." Micheal groaned slightly. He'd never see his son or wife until they had peace at this rate! He'd go gray and his son would be a Commander while his wife would be a Captain.

Then again, maybe he was just looking on the bad side of things. The stress of being a spook meant you got more weary looks and a lot of whispered conversations tended to die when you took a step into a room, then doubled when you left because apparently a spook showing up and getting coffee from the mess was a sign of the coming intelligence apocalypse for the local area.

He stopped in his inner rambling and instead paid attention to Majestic's little presentation. Essentially informing them that the Citadel council was an amalgam of alien species lead by the Council itself, which was comprised of three big players. The first being the Asari, basically humans with tentacles, blue skin and were all physically female, though mono-gendered so in all technicality they were just Asari.

"They were the first species to discover this Citadel station," Majestic's voice rang out informatively. "Lets see, they're known for being strong supporters of diplomacy, understanding real motherly. Interestingly they can live for a thousand years." that made more than a few people whisper about. "My I wish I look that at one thousand." Majestic joked before continuing. "Moving on. That brings us to the second race, the Salarians."

The images changed again to a 3D model of the alien in question. Nimble looking, amphibians by the looks of them. Two horns on its head, big eyes and slender forms. "Salarians are short lived species, their high metabolism often means they lived to, at best, forty five. However, where they live short lives. They are incredibly spry and fast thinking, most creative species the Citadel has going for them. They are essentially the Espionage branch of the Council."

The image shifted again. This time, it was one they all recognized. The steroid abusing Kig-Yar look-a-likes. "These our are current foes, known as the Turians, they are the military arm of the council, providing the bulk of the military fleet and ground forces. They are well respected, disciplined and rigid. That covers the big three of the council, the ones who are in charge." Majestic finished.

Leonardo spoke again. "These are the three powers who have arrayed

against us and constructed a massive fleet to try and cow us into surrender, butâ€¦ well, you know how that story ended for them." Leonardo chuckled briefly. "My plan, along with agreements with the brass, have been to negotiate a suitable team of diplomats to act as an envoy to this council, along with escorting their own envoy back to them as a sign of faith in our wishes for peaceful resolution. To this end, the ship we will need to send will be powerful, but fast, if things go badly, chances are the crew will be lost if a Slipspace jump is not initiated."

His grim tone reminded everyone that bad things could happen without reason.

"The envoy will be sent within the next six hours sharp. They arrive at this citadel and from there, our conditions for peace will be explained. Conditions being outlined hereâ€¦" he tapped a key on his tablet and send a file to everyone in the room.

However, in the deepest, most remote circuits of the Atlas station, where few AIs tread due to the clutter and movement of the smaller programs, a packet of data, an ping of intelligence, sifted through the streams of data, latching onto Leonardo's file, and as quickly as it was sent it was copied and the data ping retreated deeply into the systems of the Atlas again, covering its digital tracks along the way.

The data was store into a five layer encrypted file, compressed and encoded as "junk" data, sent to a small, barely noticeable antenna on the dark side of the station where a tight beam transmission was sent out, linking with perfect accuracy to a pitch black satellite at the edge of the system, which read the data and through heavily encrypted channels sent the packet along elsewhere.

* * *

><p>Widow System, 2145, 20:00 Cycles. Citadel
Calendar.
The Citadel, Council chamber. The Council.

>The Citadel was the utmost center of galactic power, it was the beacon in which all civilised space thrived and where any who joined its fold were offered technology, peace and prosperity. Where many species gathered to discuss the next great breakthrough in politics, technology or society so it may better them all as a whole.

It was also home to the Citadel council, Quinterus representing the Turians, the military might of the Turian Hierarchy was the Council's dutiful enforcers. Disciplined and loyal in the most impressive of ways, he was to be the shining example that all Turians were to strive for.

And he was currently so wasted that he was slumping in his chair, downing his second bottle of Turian brandy while Tevos and Tala watched as he did so. They hadn't left the council main chambers ten minutes ago after receiving the news about the fate of their now captured "show of force" now turned "biggest military botch up", Tevos herself was so livid that she didn't even have the words to reprimand Quinterus for his blatant alcohol consumption. In fact, it seemed only Tala was taking this situation in stride. Why? Because she wasn't going to live long enough to see how this all turned out,

good or bad she'd be dead loooong before anything good or bad came of this.

She was glad for her species short lifespan there.

"This wasâ€¦" Quinterus took a moment to give the Turian equal of a burp. "Will! Go down in my family as the biggest mistake of my careerâ€¦ I'll be tried for gross incompetence, hung and then my named shamed! Becauseâ€¦ Becauseâ€¦" he didn't continued, and instead backed the bottle again.

Tevos herself was nursing a massive headache and trying to reel her indignation in before she ended up like her last relationship, bitter and hitting her head against a proverbial wall. This was a total disaster, they had underestimated the opposing forces, no, underestimated would be a statement for a battle that had been lost, there wasn't even a battle. They had simply been brought into a trap that had been flawlessly executed and now three hundred ships and all their crews were political hostages until peace agreements could be made.

The unknowns had friends, and Tevos would be laughing now if she wasn't aware of the fact that those friends possessed ships 1/3 the size of the Citadel itself! And the fleet that had ambushed them had multiple of these crafts. Such size was unheard of! The resources required for such a ship was simply too wasteful in a battle where speed was key. But those lumbering giants took speed out of the equation considering that every piece of hull they had appeared to be covered in Directed Energy Weapons if the readings were correct.

It was utter madness. What had they stumbled upon? For centuries since her species first found the Citadel, this station had been the most secure, the most respected, even the most feared construct that seated the ruling government of no less than eight species. Elcor, Volus, Drell, Hanar, Salarian, Asari, Turian and Batarian.

Their power had been absolute in their own space, their agents, the Spectres, feared and renowned as their right hand. Their fleets unmatched. It wasn't perfect, no government was, but it worked well enough for everyone.

And now, loathe as she was to admit it, it was now all at risk.

"This could be the final days of the Citadel council being considered the ruling body of galactic society." Tala noted from her spot, while her cohorts nursed alcohol, Tala busied herself with her tablet, typing with speed only a Salarian could, eyes darting here and there, the perfect picture of calm and calculating. For once, Tevos admired her. "Most interesting times."

"Interesting?" Quinterus snapped with a slur. "You call this interesting? We were the undisputed power and no one could match us! Nowâ€¦ nowâ€¦? Well, look at it!" he waved his hand, and an image of the two enemy fleets appeared on the council retiring chambers view screen. "We have faced that and our fleet that was supposed to cow them, has been cowed!" he tossed his bottle at the screen, which Tevos raised a hand and caught with her biotics before it could do any real harm. She floated it over to herself and set it down.

Then, she herself snapped.

"This was both of your faults!" She snarled, more to Quinterus than Tala, who didn't so much as glance at her, infuriatingly she went on. "I voted for a simple peaceful envoy, and now instead you both chose to use this cowing fleet option and look where its put us! In hours this will be news across Citadel and Terminus space! We will be mocked, panics will erupt and the species as a whole will demand answers and what can we give them?" she sneered. "We got our plan handed back to us on the rear of our new enemies hands and now we're at their mercy! Our government could very well be at risk, Goddess it might not even exist before the weeks end!"

"A very real conclusion," Tala quipped, still appearing quite distracted by whatever was on her tablet. "Like I said. Interesting times ahead." that said, she tapped a key and Quinterus and Tevos' Omni-Tools blinked. Making them look at them while Tala stood, dusted her robes off and began to make for the exit.

Tevos opened the message, skimmed a few lines and then glared at Tala's retreating form. "You can't just resign here and now!" she called, furious. Did the Salarian think she could get knee deep into this mess and just send a quick letter and leave?

Tala paused at the door, turned her head and said. "I just did." the door opened, and she marched out. Leaving Tevos and Quinterus as the sole members of the Citadel council standing members.

"Surprised she didn't just put I quit," Quinterus grunted with disinterest. He stood, opened up his Omni-Tool and began to work on what Tevos guessed was his own resignation letter. "May as well get mine outta the way." a few clicks. "Done. Sent. Bye, Tevosâ€¦ hope your sweet blue rear gets outta this without being too sore."

Quinterus staggered along, and disappeared into the council bathroom. She didn't bother to correct him in his course now give a verbal reply. She instead sighed, filed their messages away, she'd make a public address about this later. For now, she had to work to salvage this situation. The Citadel needed a full council and it needed one two hours ago.

She skimmed a few of the up and coming profiles she kept saved away in case she ever need some quick fills for any moment she'd had to have the other two councillors removed. None stuck out, she frownedâ€¦ none of them would do, they needed ingenuity and creative thinkers, this situation was unprecedented and so required unprecedented councillors to fill the place of Intelligence and Military.

Tevos skimmed more than a dozen files before she decided to put more effort into less conventional crop fields as it were, finally, she decided to give some old friends a call. She secured the encrypted channels, made the room wire tight and locked Quinterus in the bathroom, he was being quiet so she assumed he passed out or hung himself, Either way suited her fine.

Two screens appeared, connections pending, connections pendingâ€¦ finally, they flickered on. Tevos smiled as truly as she could at seeing her old friends. "Sparatus, Valern. It's been

awhile." she greeted them.

Sparatus looked older than she remembered, then again, as Commander of the Turian Special Forces Division, AKA Blackwatch, he supposed his work had him make some very morally grey, very questionable decisions for the betterment of the galaxy as a whole. But where his face appeared older, his eyes however still had that sharp edge to them. Turians were very rigid, very straight thinkers and generally "thinking outside the box" wasn't their forte, but Sparatus was a free thinker in his military methods and had been demoted, and promoted, for them. His current placement as commander of the Blackwatch was a testament to that.

Valern was currently one of the Salarians who was runner up for position as the Dalatrass for the Salarians, though Tevos suspected that had he wanted the position earlier he would have had it. Instead she knew that for a Salarian, Valern was patient, methodical and was able to see angles in almost anything if it concerned Intelligence. He had been working with the STG when she first met him nine years ago, he had been young then and she had been his charge for a political gathering at the Union's home planet of Sur'Kesh. She had taken a liking to his personality, he wasn't as chatty as most Salarians, but he was incredibly insightful.

Both blinked at her in surprise, since it had been almost two years since they had spoken to each other, let alone been on the same frequency. "Tevos, Sparatus. I didn't expect either of you to ever contact me again." Valern spoke, sounding genuinely surprised. "Heard about the fleet."

"We've heard too," Sparatus said next. "My superiors have ordered me to prepare a number of scenarios for Palavan and our outlining colonies for defense plans in case things get ugly, But I get the feeling this will be second priority for me when this call is over." he paused, staring at Tevos with intensity that made her shiver inside. "So, tell me, Tevos. You've called on me and Valern. I can only assume this means the situation is dire."

"It is." Tevos nodded, banishing the memories of she and Sparatus' intimate relations twelve years ago from her mind. Now was not the time for intimacy, but the time for plots. "Tala and Quinterus just resigned and I'm two members short of a competent council. I'll cut to the chase, I want you both at my side. I need creative thinkers who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. And since you've both dipped your hands in blood of all colors. I choose you two."

Again, silence, before finally Valern spoke first again. "Very well, I accept this offer." more order. "When am I to be appointed?"

"In the next five hours, be here in two, we need to discuss what comes after your appointment." Tevos replied, looking at the Turian, who appeared to be mulling it over still. "Sparatus, what say you?"

His mandibles twitched, brow plates shifting. Finally, he said, "I accept as well. I'll be on the first craft to the Citadel, expect me within the next hour." he paused. "I guess this makes us the new council." he mumbled.

"It does," Tevos agreed.

"Mhm," Valern nodded. "Interesting times ahead." with that, he disconnected, leaving Tevos and Sparatus to themselves.

"We'll speak more when you arrive," Tevos said, cutting the connection when Sparatus gave an accenting nod. Once alone again, she sighed and slumped back into her chair, leaning her head back and staring at the ceiling of the council chamber. What a mess, least she'd have her friends at her side before the day was over and with a little blessed luck from the Goddess they could salvage this situation.

"I pissed alll over that wall! And I liked it!" Quinterus raged as he staggered out the correct exit this time.

Tevos sighed. Massaging her temples, "I could have him killedâ€| no one would have to knowâ€|" she mumbled. Oh how tempting it was. But for now, she still had strings to pull and plans to set into motion, If communications were to be believed. The unknown forces would be sending their envoy via a single ship here to the Citadel within the next six hours, along with the Citadel Envoy as "signs of good will", more like hostages without being hostages.

Much as she hated to admit it, Tala and Valern had been right. Interesting times ahead for them all.

* * *

><p>January 14, 2582. Military Calendar.
UNSC **_**Cloak and Dagger**_**, Unknown System. 2000 Hours.

>Many in the UNSC and much of her allies believed that the newly created ONI tower on Reach was the seat of the Office of Naval Intelligences' power. But it wasn't, it was a shiny building filled with offices for the members of Section I, II and III. A simple lounge to keep up appearances to the public and the brass as a whole who believed ONI had become moreâ€| tame as of late, hardly the case. ONI had simply kept its head down while the flak had flown after Parangosky's assassination and the execution of the current head of ONI at the time, Serin Osman, when she had been named a key player in Parangosky's big "Cripple the Sangheili" plot. Along with the deletion of the AI Black Box, the executions of Spartan Naomi and the rest of Kilo-Five.

In the confusion, no one had noticed that some very sensitive, very black files had been misplaced. Some of which hinted at the beginning construction of the _Cloak and Dagger _in 2559. And its estimated completion time to be 2572. However, with the advances in tech along the way, but the time the _Cloak and Dagger _had been halfway completed, it had to be refitted and redesigned to be completely up to date. It had finally come online in 2575 and had served as the Office of Naval Intelligence's real head quarters.

Black as night, the size of a heavily armored Marathon-Class cruiser. It's Hull was a mixture of layers, the outer layer being sonar, thermal and Electronic counter measure mesh to hide them from every sort of sensor the galaxy could throw at them. The middle layer was Titanium-F2 plating, 2.5 meters of it. And the inner layer was a series of insulating measures to ensure top grade heat distribution and ECM efficiency. It ran on three Infinity-Class propulsion engines and eight Frigate-Class support thrusters. Using the latest "baffler"

technology for her engines allows her to run dark in space at forty-percent power to her engines. Added to the ACP, or Adapt Camouflage Plating that could be enabled at a moments notice making her entirely invisible to the naked eye for a real close look other prowlers would faint at. She was a ghost of a ship and since all her records of existence had been safely sealed away in her massive library of on board data.

She didn't exist. Just like her predecessor Point of No Return.

It was on this phantom ship that a meeting of the most powerful individuals in the Intelligence workings of the UNSC, maybe even Forerunner space itself, would be happening. Away from the eyes of all by God himself, and even then, the meeting was of people who didn't believe in God, just that they had a job and that they knew they were very good at it.

In a room, hidden in the bowels of the ship itself. Where no signals could enter or escape, a room, white in walling, red floored and in the center was a simple round table with three comfortable chairs. It was vacant, only a single light over the table illuminated the otherwise dark room. And when the wall hissed, signalling a door being opened to this limbo, did the remainder lights switch on and bathe it in brightness.

The first man to enter was young in appearance. Dark hair slicked back, with just the barest hints of gray setting in at the crown. His eyes were a striking blue and his skin almost milky white, deigning his lack of time in actual sun. He wore no uniform, instead only a business suit, rich in make. Navy blue in color, a dark red tie with the ONI's eye seated over his right breast. He wore no medals, no rank to signal his station within the UNSC.

With methodically paced steps, he entered and took the left seat, reclining comfortably into the chair. Behind him moments later entered another individual, this time a striking woman, her uniform hugged her body, and in place of pants was a skirt that went below her knees, but was parted up the left, showing off a dangerous amount of flesh to the wandering eyes. Her skin was more sun kissed, her hair was dark as night and it cascaded over her shoulders like a black waterfall. Her heels clattered on the floor until she took a seat opposite the first man. Neither spoke, but their eyes met. She was older than him, even then, her face was flawless and her shoulder bore the rank of Captain.

The final member of their party stepped in shortly. He was older, hair grey, face wrinkled in age and his right eye was covered by a black eye patch, the hints of a nasty scar long healed running down from said eye all the way to his jaw. His singular grey eye glanced at his younger counterparts as he took the final seat. Wearing a uniform and bearing the rank of Rear Admiral.

The door hissed closed and finally when it clicked. They all knew nothing electronic, no sound, would leave this room until that door opened again.

"I suppose you've all heard why I'm calling us together." began the old man, looking at his cohorts. His accent one of old Earth southern.

The blue eyed man leaned forward, getting into a more professional seating position. "I hear many things, Albert." He said, tone patiently cold but relaxed. "But, you're referring to Leonardo's recent admission to peace talks with our new _friends_"

Friends. That wasn't a word the three of them believed in. There was only useful and useless. Known and unknowns. And right now, the "friends" were unknown and Leonardo was walking into them with open arms, a hug and chocolates in hand. Needless to say, ONI didn't like that.

The older man, Albert nodded in confirmation. "You're correct, Jack." he leaned forward. "Where do we, as ONI, stand?"

The woman, Vanessa, spoke up next. "Officially? We're behind the Fleet Admiral all the way." she informed them.

"Andâ€¦" Jack raised a brow. "Our real opinion?"

She raised a hand, delicately moving some of her night black locks from obscuring her beautiful face. "We need to find out more about our foe before we enter talks. Simple as that." she stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the galaxy. And for ONI, it was.

"Of course," agreed Albert. "Topic of the week, How do we stall peace talks and find out a bit more about our new friends?" he asked, spreading his hands to his fellows. "I'm open to ideas."

There was silence as the three pondered their scenarios, a minute passed before Jack produced a cigar, lighting it up and taking a slow drag before exhaling softly. "We stop the envoy." he said simply.

Albert narrowed his eyes. "Explain." he demanded. Vanessa listened with interest as well.

"We stop the envoy. Stage a little accident that leaves both sides tense, but scrambling to prepare a new diplomatic meeting team. It should buy us, at worse, three days. At most, a week. Depending how fast Leonardo and this Citadel Council can tune their suspicions down." He took another drag, then exhaled before talking on. "We use that time to collect some â€¦ ah, samples, if you will, of their technology and population from the planet we so mercifully spared and the wreckages from their ships in orbit." he explained.

Vanessa nodded. "How do you propose we stop the envoy then?"

"Well, the easiest option would be to stage a Slipspace accident, with some strings attached we get a ship of our choosing, preferably a semi-newer frigate, one we can sacrifice to the greater good. Andâ€¦" Jack wriggled his brows and his lips quirked at the corners. "well, as you know, Slipspace engines, no matter how many safeties are present, can sometimes still fail. Often at the worse of times."

Albert narrowed his eyes but nodded. "I like it, simple, effective and can't be directly linked to us. How are we to handle the fallback for this then?" he turned his gaze on Vanessa, who straightened slightly and cleared her throat.

"I can have a few contacts with CENTCOM and the Engineering corps easily rig the Slipspace drive to fail of whatever ship we choose. Naturally, given the nature of the device and our solution in question. We'll have to make sure the agent we use to broker this little deal is sufficiently silenced." she explained.

"Any names?"

"I'm thinking Morrison, he's been putting on years now and his performance with wetwork is slipping, he's only good as an informant now for our ears inside the disorganized rebel front in the outer colonies. We can tell him this will be his last mission for us, pay him a hefty sum and send the instructions. Once its done, he is conveniently killed in a breaking and entering gone wrong."

"Shame really," Jack chuckled. "The outer colonies are still so dangerous with terrorist activity."

"Quite," Vanessa said dryly. "As for sample collection. Wreckage from their ships should be well enough technology wise, so would be the dead floating in space from said ships. If we want living samples, a few of our boys could take them from the colony itself. Maybe get our hands on a few other species." she suggested.

Albert nodded. "It will have to do, considering our time frame is expected to be three days or a week. We'll operate under the assumption it will be a three day window. Deploy two prowlers, one for wreckage retrieval and another for living bodies from the planetside. I'll make sure they're not questioned."

Vanessa nodded. "I'll get a list of personnel for the collection teams."

Jack took a drag, puffed a breath and added. "I'll get our funds for this within the next two hours and get into contact with Morrison. I'll send him the details." he paused to glance between them. "Anything else we need to discuss?"

"No, this is it for now." Albert stood, as the last one to enter, he'd be the first to leave and signal the meeting's end. "Good day to you both." Jack inclined his head and Vanessa nodded. Albert left, then Vanessa and finally, Jack as well.

Just another day at the office for ONI's Cerberus.

* * *

><p>End of chapter eleven.

There you go, another update, to try and make up for my extreme laziness with the slow update of the last chapter. And yup, ONI is on the prowl and even more powerful then it was before. With its three heads, it seemed only right to call it Cerberus, whether or not it's actually Cerberus, wellâ€¦ you'll have to wait and see, huh?

13. Chapter twelve

In Infinitum: First Contact

****Chapter twelve****

****Widow System, 2145, 22:00 Cycles. Citadel Calendar.**

>HWS _Spirits Abroad**_**. En route to Citadel Station. Sparatus.**

>The Frigate's translight engines thrummed as they propelled the Spirits Abroad closer to the citadel. It was a noble ship to be sure, it had seen more than a dozen deployments against pirates in the Traverse and come under attack now less than three times by more bold pirates looking for a big haul in the form of a Turian frigate. She had survived all that and now it was serving as Sparatus' transport to the Citadel where he would be appointed to Councillor Sparatus within three cycles and be brokering peace talks to the unknowns in four. To say today would be interesting would be understating it immensely.

As he sat in well lit cabin, typing away at a console his eyes skimmed over various reports sent back from the captured fleet, nothing seemed out of place. The enemy was apparently not jamming communications and their only order was "do not move or we shoot", so, stationary and in a kill ground they had to comply.

An envoy would be here on a frigate in four cycles and it would be Valern, Tevos' and himself trying to bargain with them to get their fleet back and colony of Falcus. Tensions in the upper echelons of the military for all three species were high. And it was being noticed, scattered patrol reports indicated a twenty percent increase in activity from the terminus borders. Even the Terminus systems were getting twitchy, likely expecting an invasionâ€¦ if only they knew.

Even their allies were now taking military notice. Elcor were nervous, fleets were being prepared and Volus banking was stockpiling funds for a possible war to break out. The Hanar, well, they were preaching peace and likely wouldn't do much sides offers blessings of the Enkindlers and send funding, maybe hand them a Drell assassin or two for private operations.

But if Spirits permit there wouldn't be a war, not yet at least. As it stood, Sparatus knew their foe would crush them if they went to war now. The enemy was a lot of unknowns and they had friends, powerful friends if the reports were right and the Turian in him admired the sheer boldness of the threat they displayed without even saying a word. The enemy knew they had them by the gullet and weren't about to let go until some agreement could be reached.

And to think, all this over an attacked patrol. How the Spirits sense of humor eluded him.

"_Commander, we're docking with the citadel now, shall we inform Councillor Tevos' you've arrived?_" The Captain's voice rang through his Omni-Tool.

"She already knows I'm here, no doubt," Sparatus replied, standing and making his way over to the doors. "And cancel my security detail. I'm quite capable of defending myself, Captain Haratus."

"_Of course, Commander_." the com went out.

Haratus was a good man, obeyed the order without hesitation. Sparatus

would have put the man forward for a full promotion, but, he knew Haratus preferred his posting where he was, so he wouldn't rob his fellow Turian of the comfortable positionâ€¦ but if things turned ugly with recent developments they'd need Captain's like Haratus at the helm of battle groups commanding more than just their own ships.

Sparatus left the cabin and proceeded along the halls towards the airlock. The few crew members who he passed gave salutes, then continued along with their work despite the rather stiff posture in which they saluted, they were all aware of his position and power so they acted as they should, intimidated and curt while being all levels of respectful.

Once he reached the airlock, he quickly stepped into the decontamination chamber, which then passed the usual scans since he was in a bit of a rush, the doors clicked and opened for him so he could step out onto the Citadel Security's private docking hanger for VIPs of political and military personnel. From here he would take an elevator down into the main offices of C-Sec where transport would be waiting to take him directly to the Citadel Tower where he, Tevos and Valern would become the new council and begin the massive task of fixing this fiasco.

He was greeted by four members of the C-Sec's Special Response Teams. Their top of the line Heavy Agent armor and Mark X Savior Assault Rifles. Saviors were the mainline weapon across the Citadel Security forces, ruggedly dependable and possessing enough fire power to match even the Turian's own Pheaston, it's firing speed was less than said Turian weapon, but otherwise its combat stats were nearly identical.

It was however more customizable. Able to be fitted, even in the heat of battle, with barrels, grips, add-ons from aftermarket and "other" sources. As long as they improved combat ability, however, Sparatus was sure the higher ups at C-Sec allowed such purchases. It was a good practice that Sparatus could appreciate since he himself throughout his career had used black market sources to attain gear that would otherwise be more troublesome to attain in his work as a Black Watch soldier.

"Commander Sparatus," one of the SRT member, another Turian, greeted him cordially, just a hint of awe-ing respect in his tone. This was a Turian who didn't try to seem so excited or nervous about meeting the Commander of the Black Watch. "We've been told to escort you to your transport outside of C-Sec, if you'll follow us, sir?"

"Of course," Sparatus nodded graciously. "Let us go, I've some important matters that need my attention."

"At once, Commander." The Turian nodded to the others and together, the four turned and with Sparatus at the center of their formation proceeded towards the elevator, which opened for them and allowed them. Once closing behind them it began to descend into the depths of the C-Sec Academy.

The ride wasn't overly long and it was quiet. When the doors parted again, that all changed when Sparatus' vision was clouded by at least seven hover cams and a small crowd of news reporters. Salarians, Turian, Asari, Elcor and even a Volus moved forward, shooting

questions at him in a flurry he could only liken to gunfire.

"Is it is true that the fleet assembled by the council was captured at Falcus?"

"Genuine Inquiry; Is this a prelude to war?"

"Are the rumors about the previous Salarian and Turian councillors resigning not hours ago true?"

"Are you to be the next councillor?"

"Is there any information you wish to divulge about the events at Falcus?"

Sparatus heard one of the Salarian SRT members curse about what fool let it leak that Sparatus would arriving at this time. And the Commander secretly agreed, though he remained stone faced as the SRT members moved forward, to which Sparatus raised a hand, stopping them. "Stand down." he commanded. They did so and Sparatus walked forward.

"All of you," he spoke firmly, and the question ceased at the tone he used to command veteran soldiers and even cow lesser ranked officers into line. And to a civilian like these reporters, the tone was one of utter dominance. "Now is not the time for these questions. All will be answered in time by the council and I'm sure the public will be made aware of any details. But right now, I am in the dark as you are. Which is why I've been brought here, to find out the details about what is happening at Falcus." he paused, "I will allow one question, onlyâ€¦ fromâ€¦"

He raised a talon, and pointed to the Asari. Asari were more level headed and intelligent, unlike the other reporters, she had held her tongue and merely awaited her chance to speak. Which showed him she was patient, so her question would likely be something invasive, but nothing damning like these Shathas looking for a scapetrow.

The Asari blinked in surprise, and the other reporters outright glared, but none spoke out. She stepped forward, clearing her throat. "Thank you, Commander." she said, tone cordial. "I'm Kela S'tori with the Galactic Asari News network." she bowed her head with practiced grace while ignoring the glares.

Sparatus bowed his in turn. "Commander Sparatus with the Turian Hierarch Special Divisions." he lifted his head, raising a brow plate. "Now, your question?"

"Yes, of course." Kela cleared her throat. "With this rare opportunity, I'd like to askâ€¦ should the public be worried about the events at Falcus?"

Sparatus stared at her, eyes focused and posture relaxed. "No," Sparatus replied shortly, everyone gave him a look of disbelief. He went on, unphased. "Because the council has never failed to bring about peaceful resolution before, not since the Rachni and Krogan Rebellions. I am confident that the council will pacify these events as well and our routines will return to normal before long."

He paused, then said. "I must go, I've other matters to attend to

with the council. Good day to all of you." he bowed his head, and stepped through the throng of people as they parted for him, the SRT members following after him when they made it to the elevator exit. He closed his eyes, shaking his head. "The news is a military force in itself, I would almost grant each reporter a rank" he chuckled to himself.

"Sir, I think you handled it very well, considering we Turians aren't big on speeches," The Turian SRT member added, to which Sparatus gave a humming agreement. "But" did you mean what you said? Not to be worried?"

"Of course not, but we're soldiers and should be used to receiving news that doesn't bode well for our fate," Sparatus replied, eyes forward and steps still light as if walking in a park and not in the heart of the Citadel. "The public, however" are not as experienced in such things, one panics, says something stupid and the person beside them reacts, soon they all begin to feel the creeping fear. Running along the crowds, it will spread and cause panic, the net will run with posts of fear, speculations and soon, the choices of the military and political figures will be called into question." Sparatus frowned.

The SRT members themselves paid rapt attention.

"And when that happens, the politicians will try their hand at using military forces to make their own agendas happen, trying to take power under pressure of losing their stations and soon even the military will be bogged down in red tape, operations pushed back and intelligence overlooked in haste., Mistake after mistake will be made and before any real battle could be fought" His eyes narrowed and shook his head. "We'll have already lost. All because the public panicked."

There was silence as the five of them moved across the Presidium to an air car port. From there, another vehicle awaited them. More SRT members stood by it, awaiting them. "So, you see? The Public is a variable of war that cannot be relied upon, yet must be taken into all accounts for it is they who can give all the support, or delays, needed to win or lose." Sparatus stopped, then looked at the Turian, raising a brow plate. "What is your name, soldier?"

The SRT member paused, then replied. "Garrus, Commander. Garrus Vakarian." the Turian replied, raising a hand scratch at the helmet of his uniform in what Sparatus called an embarrassed gesture.

"Well, Sergeant, I have a good feeling about you. So I'll be sure to keep my eye on you," Sparatus turned, giving the Sergeant a brief salute. "Until next time we meet, Sergeant Vakarian, Do take care until then," dropping the salute and getting into the air car. Which lifted off, then moved towards the Citadel tower with haste.

That left the SRT teams standing there, and one Garrus Vakarian stunned at what Sparatus had done and said to him. A good" feeling? Garrus wasn't sure how to take that, he was on the Special Response Team, a Sergeant, leading this small team and even then he was given smaller assignments. Because of his "loose cannon" style during his time in the investigation corps. Which he had been promoted to not a year ago and it had cost Garrus twice as much work as it had because

of his up and downs in his career.

Ups being his long list of small successes since his first enlistment in C-Sec and downs being his almost-as-long list of 'rash and loose cannon decisions' throughout his career in the Investigation corps, mostly his attitude towards authority. He disobeyed orders here and there, made a few "bad calls" that were belayed by his superiors and mouthed off to more than a few superiors due to their orders and his conflicting ideas of proper conduct on the job.

This had followed him into the Special Response Teams, since his acceptance into them he had been given nothing but low level out-of-the-way assignments, small level raids, guard duty and training drills with new recruits to the SRT. He busted his gizzard off trying to rise in ranks from Private to Sergeant. Where he was in charge of a small four man team now.

And now, Commander Sparatus of the Black Watch had just shown interest in him, a good feeling as he had put it. And now something in Garrus' gut was telling him this was a turning point in his life that would begin to make the Spirits will for him more known. Hopefully, it would finally break his stigma then again, his stigma was born of his ideals and attitude clashing with standard procedures so it likely wouldn't end, never so long as he was bogged down in "standard procedure" like a grunt.

If if he were a Spectre, he could do what he wanted, how he wanted. At the end of the day his methods would get results and in doing so his ideals would be satisfied and he would still be serving the council to the very best of his abilities, no restrictions sides his own moral grounds and those set by the council itself. Little to no red tape, almost unlimited access.

Garrus wanted that authority. He admitted it wasn't very Turian of him. Perhaps Sparatus could give him that? If so, Garrus would be forever indebted to the Commander. But, he was getting ahead of himself, no he'd wait and serve for now. And prey his time came when he could break those restrictions that always got in his way of achieving justice.

"Let's return to base," Garrus said, snapping from his thoughts. "And drinks are on me tonight, I think those reporters made sure we all need one."

His team didn't verbally acknowledge it, but he could feel their agreement in the way their shoulders sagged in relaxation. Good he wasn't alone in his need for a strong drink. They turned, and proceeded back towards C-Sec academy.

* * *

><p>Citadel Tower, Council Chambers. 22:00 Cycles.
*Tevos was scrolling over the various reports she had just received from the captured fleet. Nothing had so far changed in their situation. They were still surrounded, severely outgunned and were still being treated fairly enough that conditions weren't unbearable, but some of the commanders and captains were getting antsy with the inaction of just sitting there, waiting for the order that would release or destroy them. Tevos could understand that, as a former Commando she had been taken prisoner once before and the feeling of knowing an

enemy had her life completely in their hands was something she hated to be reminded of.

She took a breathe. Thankfully, this UNSC and Sangheili fleet were holding true to their words of non-violence so long as their conditions were obeyed. She had quickly ordered all traffic to the Falcus colony forbidden under military order by Thessia itself. Of course, any civilian and military ships were allowed to leave the system, but they were to be thoroughly searched before being let on their way back into Citadel Space. No ships, military or otherwise, were beyond this order.

Still, essentially running the galaxy all by herself was tiring, and it had only been a few hours since Tala and Quinterus had abandoned her, so when the door hissed open and she looked up, spotting a familiar black and red uniform, the plated face and commanding eyes. She sat straighter, staring back at Sparatus who cocked a brow plate at her as if expecting her to do somethingâ€| and he always did that in their most intimate moments together.

She didn't dare blush, but those eyes almost made her give a coy response, but instead she merely offered him a smile. "Sparatus," she said, relief in her voice. "It's good to see you made good time."

The Turian stepped forward with a lethal grace that would make even the most trained Asari Commandos stand at attention. She however had seen that stride before, and it made her tingle with a pang of desire. He approached and stood before her, she lowered her datapad and stared right back up at him.

"Tevos." His flanged voice was deep, light hearted in greeting. But it still held the firmness his position demanded of him. "You look well, but that's to be expected." his mandibles twitched slightly in what she could tell was teasingly amused. "How long has it been?"

Tevos felt her lips twitch upwards. "Seven years. A passing week to an Asariâ€| but, to you, It's probably beenâ€|" she smirked. "Lonely."

He stared, then he chuckled and sat beside her, getting comfortable in the comfortable couch of the council private chambers. He leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling, eyes focused until he spoke. "Not overly. But before we continue on this interesting path of conversation, we should perhaps wait until we're alone." he rolled his neck, resulting in a loud pop. "Valern, you can reveal yourself now."

Tevos blinked when at the corner of the room nearest to the door shifted, then appeared Valern, his cloaking field powered down. He was wearing his standard STG white-red armor, a Tac visor over his right eye. It scrolled with data that Valern couldn't read, both in speed and smaller font at the distance they were. But to a Salarian with such speed? It was likely moving in relatively slow speed.

"Still as observational as ever, Sparatus," Valern raised his hands and clapped them together thrice. "You've not lost your edge as a soldier. You brute."

Sparatus chuckled again, offering an amused look at the Salarian.
"And you're still such a skulker."

Despite the insulting terms for soldier and stealth, Tevos could tell there was no hostility behind the words. It was just as she had seen seven years ago when she and they had worked together to resolve a hostage situation with Anti-Council extremists. It had been interesting evening to say the least and had ended with not only the local security forces coming upon the three of them surrounding by two dozen dead hostiles, wounded, but victorious. She smiled fondly at the memory.

"How long were you there, Valern?" Tevos asked, looking at her Salarian counterpart.

"Not long, I slipped in behind Sparatus when he opened the door, I'm surprised you didn't notice me as wellâ€¦ but, again you've been giving orders behind a desk and while you're still sharp mentally as a politician, your skills as a soldier have likely sufferedâ€¦ most naturally, your ability to sense that which cannot be seen." Valern paused in his speech, then added. "Something we'll probably have to work on if we all are to embark on our future course, no?"

"True," Sparatus agreed, closing his eyes. "Now, before we start reminiscing, lets get the details out of the way, Tevosâ€¦ explain the latest reports." he said, assuming his leadership position among the councilâ€¦ and since this was a military like situation, Tevos would allow him to take the lead on this.

"Very well," she raised her datapad and typed a few commands.

The main screen scrolled some reports along with visual captures of the enemy fleets, single ships and formations along with dozens of speculative notes from various officers across the Citadel fleet. Sparatus and Valern read them as they came, their eyes flickering to the provided images and with the calculative eyes of the career soldiers they were continued to read.

When all the data was finished and began to repeat. Sparatus waved for it to stop, and she did so. He looked rather troubled, then again he was handling the facts of the situation drives better than Quinterus had, and Valern was taking the situation in stride just as Tala had, except without the resigning part.

"So, we're sure of the following," Valern began. "This United Nation Space Command and Sangheili forces have significant technological advances, far above our own in terms of weapons and tactics. They use no Element Zero, have functional laser weaponry, and high powered, super velocity ship grade cannons. Along with smaller point defense cannons of these magnetic accelerators. Even more troubling is the ability to open portals and travel across space unseen and appear in another part of the galaxy." he paused, "Of course, I speculate that last bit. I'd need more data. Howeverâ€¦"

He focused on the capital ship. The ship that had been identified by the enemy Admiral as _UNSC Daedalus_. "This ship of itself possesses some of the most amazing technology we've seen thus far. It operates in atmosphere despite its size, has multiple point-blank defensive accelerator cannons and while primitive, it can deploy a massive of

amount of ground and space forces from within its hangers. Along with its special weaponry. It's forward energy cannons. The data collected shows it was able to destroy two dreadnaughts in a single shot?"

"Two dreadnaughts and a frigate. The first target being a dreadnaught was utterly destroyed, it's reactor didn't even have time to breach and go critical." Sparatus corrected the Salarian. "The other dreadnaught was skimmed, but the resulting heat and damage made its reactor burn up and go critical, the frigate was cut in half due to the width of the beam." He continued, sighing softly.

"Not even the Destiny Ascension can match that sort of destructive power." He frowned. "In short, in a war, we're outgunned, pure and simple."

"And in a less than straight fight?" Tevos asked.

"Unsure," Valern replied for Sparatus. "Enemy intelligence network levels unconfirmed. But considering their tactics in space and on ground operations. I agree with Sparatus, fighting with them now would be unwise. Their ships would crush ours. We don't even know if this is their full fleet strength. Not to mention how many other allies they possess outside of theseâ€¦Sangheili."

Tevos agreed with a sigh. "Yes, so, we're to rely on diplomacy then. At least they themselves appear diplomatic, if the fact our fleets aren't gone now is any sign."

"Because they know they have us," Sparatus muttered thoughtfully. "What worries me is the terms these Humans and Sangheili will have for a cease fire. Our own bargaining position is at best weak, at worse, nonexistent." He looked at Tevos, tilting his head. "So, assuming they ask us what our terms for a cease fire are. What will we attempt to bargain for?"

"Nothing would be better than some technological samples," Valern said, taking his own seat opposite of Sparatus' side of Tevos. "But to hope they'd allow such would be foolish at best, so, outside of that. We could possibly bargain to allow us a few tours of one of their own colonies, perhaps? As a sign of good faith between our governments?"

"And in doing so we attempt to discreetly get some samples of their technology, or any intelligence we can." Sparatus groaned, which he received a nod from Valern. The Turian shook his head, "That wouldn't work either, no, so close after our defeat? Any military minds inside the enemy forces would see it coming a parsec away. They'd have our tourists under such scrutiny they'd probably be able to tell how many times their noses twitched let alone gather any worthwhile tactical or technological data."

"Point conceded," Valern nodded with a sigh. "Any other ideas then?"

"We play it safe for now," Tevos replied firmly. "We play the part of the beaten empire, peace loving and forgiving. We say our apologies and repay our debts to our foe. And while we do, we push more funding to military and ship-grade weapons research." she stated. "In our own systems. We'll also need to fill another seat on the council. Another

member race will further increase our military power due to the looser restrictions for ship production and military infantry size."

When she was sure she had their attention to her plan. She went on. "And we'll also need more soldiers ourselves. Our forces aren't enough as is, we'll need more troops as well as ships," she frowned. Not liking where she herself was going with this little plan of hers. "I think its time we brought back some outcast races back into our fold, albeit carefully."

Sparatus frowned. "The Kroganâ€|" he whispered.

"And the Quarians." Valern added, just as dubious.

Tevos nodded. "Let's face facts. If things go badly, we'll need the Krogan for their sheer brutality and combat prowess, their brutal efficiency during the Rebellions is proof enough of their ability to fight against all odds against a superior foe. Especially if we cure the Genophage and offer them their old territories back to them. Along with a few select planets." she closed her eyes. "And technologically speaking the Quarians are geniuses. They've survived their exile aboard the largest fleet in Citadel space, repairing and refining old ships to their purposes with minimal resources. They are literally at home out in the black of space. With the promise of using our power to take back their home system from the Geth. I'm sure they'll rejoin us as well as the Krogan." she gave them each a look. "One thing at a time, we must ensure the cease fire talks end without our enemy making the first shots."

Sparatus and Valern glanced at each other, then back to their Asari counterpart. "Correct," Valern agreed while Sparatus nodded. Her plans made sense and while a few details had to be ironed out, they could still work in advantage of the council. Afterall, when a combined fleet of all three major races is taken hostage you couldn't ignore the chance for a new ally in your local area.

"So, possible bad choices for the future aside. What else can we do about the current situation?" Sparatus asked.

"Not without waiting for their diplomatic envoy getting here and stating their won terms for a cease fire. So, now we waitâ€|" Tevos sighed, raising a hand to her face and massaging her temples. "And pray the Goddess grants us no small amount of luck to make sure this ends even somewhat in our favor."

Sparatus nodded, crossing his arms. "So, about me and Valern's coronation. Shall we get on with this? I'd rather not wait until the last second before we announce our appointment to Councillors. Less shock for the public that way." he stood, dusting himself uniform off. "I trust my change of clothing has been brought in?" when she nodded, he hummed in appreciation. "Good, I'll go get changed. You should as well, Valern. I want this coronation over with so we can begin putting things into motion."

"Of course," Valern nodded in agreement. "I'll go do so, I'll see you both shortly." he turned and moved towards the exit of the chamber. "Until then, do try to keep your previous intimate relationship platonic for the time being. I'd rather not have my compatriots mating while my back is turned."

He ignored Tevos' blush and Sparatus' shoulders stiffening as the Salarian exited. Sparatus gave one last bow of his head to Tevos before he turned away and moved after Valern. When she was finally alone, Tevos relaxed into the chair with a sigh.

"Finallyâ€|" She breathed to the ceiling and Goddess above. "People I can trust." she smiled.

* * *

><p>January 14, 2582. Military Calendar.
UNSC
*_**Infinity**_**-Class Command Ship *_**Daedalus**_**, Unknown system. 0800 Hours.

>"My dear Admiral," purred Lilith as she observed Lasky drying himself off from his shower, even as aged as he was, his body still had the well made sculpture of a soldier he had been. He bore his scars without shame to her eyes, of course, he knew she meant nothing by it, she was an AI. "So old, yet still such a marvellous body, even touched by age as it is." she teased.

Lasky chuckled, shaking his head and glancing over at the AI pad from where Lilith was watching him. "You know, Lilith, it's rude to stare," he teased her. Receiving a sultry wink in reply.

"I can't help it, afterall, you're the talk of the fleet, the great Admiral Lasky, who took an entirely fleet hostage without firing even a single shot." The AI said, chuckling as she raised a hand and run her fingers through her holographic locks. "I'm a lucky woman who gets to visit you any time and anywhere." she smirked.

Lasky sighed, both in appreciation and in resignation. In his younger days he would have loved for a woman such as Lilith to approach him and be soâ€| flirtatious, but now as he was aged as he was, he found his attraction to either sex had been drowned away by focus of his duties as an Admiral to the UNSC. Still, his little interactions with Lilith were as close to dates as he would allow himself during these days.

"I'm the one who's lucky," Lasky smiled fondly. "Having such a lovely, nubile woman waiting for me after my showers." he wrapped a towel around his waist and moved out of the bathroom into his private cabin. Yawning softly as he stared out the window, the blackness of space greeted him and again he felt as if he was the tiniest thing in existenceâ€| but with it was brought a sense of freedom that only staring out into space could bring. "I'm very lucky." he mumbled.

"Feeling your age, Admiral?" Lilith appeared on the pad beside the window, arms crossed under chest, pushing her assets upwards and drawing attention to them. In the time he'd worked aboard the _Daedalus _he'd seen all of Lilith's postures and the one she was using was meant to distract him. And had he been younger, he might have been. But now? He merely looked at her face. "Y'know, if you ever get too old, you can always have your brain turned into an AI matrix, I'm sure a man of your skill, determination and creativity would make an excellent AI." she paused, then winked. "And who knows? Perhaps if I'm still service if you do, we can do some work together. Run a fewâ€|simulations."

Lasky stared at her, and despite his rather asexual attitude in his growing age he found himself blushing. "Lilith! Sheeshâ€¦ even for you that's inappropriate." he shook his head and banished his blush, chuckling softly in embarrassment. "What brought this all on? You've never spoken about anything like this before." he raised an eyebrow.

Lilith actually paused, looking surprised at the Admiral's question, she blinkedâ€¦ glancing to the side and her body flickered with coding before she looked back at him. "No real reason, Admiral. Just teasing you." she offered a smirk, winking. "And sorry, Admiral, but seeing you finally blush at my teasing. I can say it will be firmly saved in my memory from here until I am done living." she chuckled.

Lasky frowned, sensing a slight hesitation in her otherwise sure and coy voice. He was about to press her for answers when she flickered and frowned, "What?"

"Our illustrious Imperial Admiral wishes to speak with you." She pouted, holding her arms tighter around herself. "Looks like our alone time is over, I'll go attend to my duties and leave you two to chat." she winked, "Chat later, Admiral." she winked out.

And then a miniature hologram of Sangheili Imperial Admiral Rtas 'Ter Vadum appeared, standing in full armor, tall and powerful as his position deemed. He was the single Imperial Admiral and held the position both out of his competence as a Fleet master and master tactician in both space and ground operations. He was instrumental in defeating the loyalists and the Covenant remnants years ago.

"_Admiral Lasky_," Rtas brought a fist to his chest and bowed his head in greeting. "_It has been long since we've fought together, let alone spoken_." he raised his gaze, observing Lasky in nothing but a towel, chuckling. "_It seems I've caught you in a vulnerable time_."

Vulnerable, Lasky chuckled. Sangheili called it such when anyone in the military was without their armor. "Just a bit, my old friend. How are things on your end?"

"_My warriors grow restless in this inaction, they wish to stain their blades with the blood of a foe of Humanity_!" Rtas replied, amused with a shake of his head. "_Do not worry, I keep their arms steady and their heads focused. Their will be no accidents on our end, this will go as your Fleet Admiral has planned. I am more worried about you and your growing age. Shouldn't an aged veteran such as you be teaching the next generation_?"

Lasky laughed aloud at that question. "The next Generation, Imperial Admiral? I am no Captain Keyes, I don't have the patience for classrooms and students. I'm content to stand in Command until my senility catches up with me." he replied, shaking his head. "As a soldier I clawed my way through the ranks. As a Captain I lead operation after operation, I ignored orders and counter mended others. I've sent people to their deaths and saved dozens more. I am old only in body." the Admiral paused, then sighed softly. "But I cannot lie, my years and duties do catch up with me at times."

Rtas hummed in agreement. "_I know the feeling, old friend. It seems as our time drags on we only stay in command because we are so mentally sound_." The Sangheili chuckled with an almost bitterly amused tone. "_Such is the fate of those born destined for glory_."

"Amen to that," Lasky agreed. "Retirementâ€¦| best and worst time of our lives it seems."

"_Mmm_." Rtas agreed.

And so, the two Admirals stood in silence, gazing at the floors of their ships in silent reverence of the double edged sword that was their natural skills that had kept them both in service for so long despite their aging bodies for a few minutes before the silence was broken by Lilith's voice.

"Admiral Lasky, word from CENTCOM, the envoy has been chosen. The UNSC Far Away has been chosen to represent humanity in the negotiations." She informed him, appearing beside Rtas, who blinked when his hologram was sharing space with the alluring AI. "Rtas, my word you look so dominating when you're on my level." She purred at him, offering a coy smile.

The Sangheili blinked again, shaking his head. "_Your words bring me both flattery and uncertainty, Construct. I shall accept the compliment, but never make it again_." he deadpanned. Not being as used to Lilith's eccentricity as Lasky was.

The AI purred again. "Oh, commanding tooâ€¦| You Sangheili are just too much sometimes." she paused, "Then again, I do so adore older men."

"Lilith, quit teasing the foreign Admiral who's fleet is parked in perfect firing angles," Lasky ordered with a roll of his eyes.

"You're no fun," Lilith pouted. "Any way, the envoy will be prepared and then sent on their way with the Citadel Council's and we can begin the first steps to bringing this whole mess to an end."

"Good." Lasky nodded. "Inform me when the ship ready, I'll relay this information the enemy General," he turned to Rtas. "I must go to my duties. Until next we speak, Imperial Admiral." Lasky smiled.

"Until then," Rtas nodded. And then his image faded, leaving Lasky and Lilith alone. However, seeing Lasky frown, she too frowned.

"Something wrong, Admiral?"

"I've a bad feeling," Lasky replied, grabbing his uniform from a nearby rack when he turned away from the window. "A very bad feeling."

Lasky didn't know how bad the event would follow said feeling.

****End of chapter twelve****

****There it is, chapter twelve! And as you can see this was more situated towards the Citadel's side of the story, particularly the newly forming Council. A few things to clarify! Yes, Garrus is not a detective, now he's a SRT member, DEAL WITH IT! Ahemâ€¦ and yes, I've given major hints that Valern, Sparatus and Tevos have all had military backgrounds and have worked together before. Along with all that, I felt the final scenes with Lasky and Lilith were just a bit of a fan service, if not just to explore the depths of Lasky's relationship with his eccentric AI partner and his friendship with Rtas. ****

****Also! To all those who've reviewed, I am overjoyed that this story has reached 400+ in just so few chapters, already more than the previous with not even half the number of chapters! Then again, with how badly written the other was, I shouldn't be so surprised. Now, special thanks to Dragolord for the helpful spell and grammar checking provided for the previous chapter who solved my overly laziness with correcting myself. Thanks, Drago! ****

****Now, keep those lovely, lovely reviews coming and I shall do my best to keep posting! Now, I'mma go watch Code Geass some more. DRAKE AWAY! -zooms off to watch Anime and eat hot wings- ****

14. Chapter thirteen

****Author Note: Ahemâ€¦ Purr, purr, **_**puuuuurrrrrrr**_**. That is all.****

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter thirteen****

****January 14, 2582. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC Destroyer-Class _Far Away**_**, Unknown system. 1100 Hours.**

>_Pssht! Pssht!_

The two guards fell over, mouths open in silent question of what the hell was happening. A single hole dead center of their foreheads, just below the protective visor of their helmets, they stared ahead with hollow eyes as the figure of their demise stepped over them gracefully into the room they had been guarding. Once inside, the pair of guards were dragged in as well, the door hissed closed and with a sigh, the figure with the suppressed M6H glanced around for a radiation suit.

She was an agent of ONI, the real ONI, the shadowy figures who had once pulled the strings of almost every UNSC operation during the Human/Covenant war. Now it was forced to keep its head down and cover its tracks lest the events of the Kilo-Five operation and a half dozen other ops that had come to light during those years had the military brass looking to plant a lot heads on some pikes. It had resulted in many assets being "cut" and some others outright sold out.

ONI had suffered much from those, but now, it was more or less back to full strength in its way of cloak and daggering through the shadows of UNSC space. Which was what brought this particular agent to the _Far Away _for her mission. She was to sabotage the Slipspace

corp so that it when fired off it would misfire instead, resulting in the _Far Away's _destruction. Afterall, no one really knew where misfired Slipspace engine portals went to. If anywhere.

She personally believed that whatever was caught in the blast was deconstructed at the molecular level. So, anything caught inside it was dead.

She reached up, removing her helmet, which was the standard uniform for the marines aboard the ship. Letting loose her darkened hair, she narrowed her dark eyes at the suit, it was a small precaution, one she didn't need if she was in any particular rush, so, she ignored it and moved over to the engine door. She entered the code, it hissed open and the pulsing engine sat in the middle of the room. Pulsing powerful energy, its solid lines were distorted, as if the thing was only partly there.

Then again, such was the nature of the Slipspace drives.

The agent stepped forward with a confident grace reserved for those who called themselves predators. Handgun sliding back into its holster, leaving both gloved hands free to use. Once near the engine, she reached up to one of the service panels and pulled it free, revealing the internal workings of the drive. It was even more distorted inside it.

Her hands reached inside and deft fingers began to work, removing a wire there, rearranging some there. It was so easy to make such a complicated piece of machinery have an accident, and due to the nature of the drives any devices placed inside it to detect malfunction were useless, so none were installed since there were no counter-measures to this effect. But Slipspace drives rarely misfired nowadays and had an operation life of thirty years before they needed to be checked over and repaired.

She pulled another wire, and was about to move it elsewhere when there was the click of another handgun being chambered behind her. Making the agent tense. "Do not move." another woman, the agent cursed slightly. "Hands up, turn around."

"Alright," she stepped back twice, turned around to face the person who was holding her at gunpoint. She blinked in surprise, part of the bridge crew, the files she had read put her as Maria Price. Ensign. "Ensign Maria Price. Thought you'd be on the bridge preparing to jump in the next half hour." the agent raised a brow despite the gun trained on her.

Maria glared, the M6H raised and steady. "I was on my way there, but when I saw the blood." she didn't finish, she knew those guardsâ€¦ Jackson and Hather, they were friendly and like her, believed in the Mantle. They were her friends and now they were gone, dead at her feet and it was because of the woman before her. She fingered the trigger but didn't fire. "Now, who the hell are you working for? The rebels?"

The dark haired woman rolled her eyes. "Call me Lawson, and who I work for is none of your business."

"Considering I have a gun on you and a security team will be here in a few moments, I think I can demand some answers." Maria said firmly.

"You reek of ONI." she suddenly said, frowning at the mention of the shadowy organization. She saw the agent's brow twitch slightly, and she smirked. "You are with them."

Lawson frowned now. "You'll never prove it." she said dismissively. It was true, short of shooting her ONI would have her out with a new name and credentials before the week was over, she was far too skilled to be simply silenced. Not with her operation record with the organization.

"I don't need to, I just need to stop you here from doing whatever you were planning." Maria considered her options. She could just shoot the ONI agent and tell them to stall the launch of the envoy. That would be the safer option, but it would stall peace talks between them and the Citadel races and that was something that didn't sit right with her.

Her next option would be waiting for the security team to arrive and take her into custody, more fuel to aid in ONI's burning at the stake was good in her books. Her husband may be a spook and she didn't approve of it, but it was who he was, and he was a liaison, not like the woman in front of him who was likely one of the organization Black Operatives.

"Thinking over your options?" Lawson raised a brow, tone turning coy. "Slow, aren't you?"

"Don't test me, spook," Maria growled. "Step forward, away from the drive." she gestured the agent forward, not that she'd let the agent too close, Maria was trained in basic self defense as per military code but if the woman in front of her was a Black Operative she was nothing short of a human Spartan for ONI.

"Make me." Lawson smirked. "You can't really shoot, the drive is right behind me and who knows will happen if that 12mm round hits it."

_Damnit. _Maria knew she was right, she couldn't risk shooting her and possibly missing to hit the drive core, that could cause all sorts of problems. The door hissed open behind her, good, the security team arrived. "I found this wom-"

Pssht!

Maria fell forward, eyes wide in shock and mouth hanging open in a soundless gasp until she hit the floor. Her body was heavy like lead, she couldn't move— there was a soft patch of warmth creeping over her upper back, and as it grew— her limbs numbed. Her vision swam and she found herself getting dizzy. "—John—Micheal—" she croaked weakly. The names of her most precious son and husband.

Pssht! Pssht!

Miranda sighed as she watched her partner, Jacob Taylor execute Maria with a pair of shots to the back of her head, "Took your sweet time, didn't you?"

"Sorry, got caught up making sure security didn't come running at her call," her dark skinned fellow ONI Black Operative replied, looking

down at Maria. "They'll notice that she won't report in." he noted.

"I know," Miranda groaned, shaking her head. "Alright, new plan. We have to set the damned drive to detonate now, give ourselves a small window." when he nodded, she continued. "Head down to the hanger, get the Pelican ready, I'll get things set up here." she turned around back to the drive.

"Got it, Miranda," The man smiled, turning away and walking out, leaving her to her work. So like Jacobâ€¦ he'd do his job, then feel sorry for it afterwards, she'd again have to console him. They worked for the better of the whole of mankind, and even if sometimes they didn't agree on methods, Miranda knew Jacob was with her until their less than glorious end.

She finished, then set a basic timer on the core and stepped back. Work done, she turned and moved back out into the halls. Nothing could stop it now, and if all were according to plan the Prowler would be waiting for them at the designated coordinates. If not, they could just move to the ship designated for the Pelican and wait there for their exfil. Miranda had planned this to the last detail afterall, well, sides being held up but there was always snags when you were on missions for ONI.

Miranda grabbed her discarded helmet and slid it back over her head, the visor came down and obscured her features sides her mouth. Which was a tight line, she raised her MA6B and shouldered it in the "at ease" position as he continued on like she was meant to be there, she was afterall an actor as well as agent.

It didn't take her long to reach the hanger and just like he said he would she saw Jacob had the Pelican ready for take off, his own pilot's uniform on snugly. He nodded in greeting as he climbed inside into the cockpit. She glanced about, not many paid attention to them before she hopped inside too.

"Alright, lets get out here, I'd rather not be caught in the blast." She said, tossing her helmet off and sighing in relief. The Pelican shuddered as the engines lifted them upwards. A moment later, they were cleared to be away. Jacob piloted the thing expertly and soon they were in the blackness of space and moving away from the _Far Away_.

In the rear hatch's viewing window. Miranda stared at the ship they had just sabotaged. When they were far enough away she closed her eyes as it was enveloped in a purple-bluish light, when it fadedâ€¦ the _Far Away _was gone.

A job done.

* * *

><p>January 14, 2582. Military Calendar.
UNSC Central Command Station *_**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 1100 Hours.

>Inside Leonardo's vast office where he commanded the entirety of the United Nation Space Command's Military structure, he had a window to view the blackness of space and he was currently looking down at the planet that had been Humanity's cradle for

thousands of years. Earth. Their birthplace.

It was their most sacred, beautiful jewel. And it absolutely sickened him to see how much they clung to a what he considered a symbol of Humanity's ability to never let go of whatever security blanket it deemed necessary. What made Earth so important that they need protect it like zealots? Then again, he had been born outside of Earth's atmosphere on Septimus VI. He wasn't from Earth so he guessed he just lacked the experience to fully understand the notion of why the planet was so important.

He reached over and took his mug of coffee. In about an hour the envoy they'd assembled would go to this Citadel and their cease fire terms would be laid out. And, considering the massive disadvantage the council would likely find itself in, they would have no choice but to agree to the terms.

_Unless they were so foolish as to believe they had any bargaining posture here? _Leonardo almost laughed at the thought. Still, he would allow them some lenience. Afterall, upholding the Mantle of Responsibility called for understanding and compromise, not tyrannical overpowering so with that in mind he would need to plan for the coming years.

Leonardo felt the air shift and the soft hiss of his door opening. He didn't need to turn around to know who would enter his room without announcement. "Hood," he said, glancing over his shoulder to see his mentor walking into the office. Leonardo turned to face him, offering a greeting raise of his mug. "To what do I owe this visit?"

The old man sighed and sat down at his desk, opposite of Leonardo's main chair. "Just dropping by to see what you're doing cooped up in your office as usual. Instead of monitoring the operation." Hood frowned a bit, "It is important. Afterall."

The Fleet Admiral blinked, "Majestic will inform me of any important developments." he shrugged, moving over and sitting opposite of Hood. "As for all my other work? I've done it already. Honestly, Mentor," Leonardo smirked. "Your faith in me seems to come and go as you age."

"Done your work?" Scoffed Hood. "Son, you learn in time that your work is never done, not since the moment that slapped those stars and bars on did you finish your work." he gestured half heartedly, which made his apprentice smile wryly.

"Of course," Leonardo agreed. "But then, that's why I'm fleet Admiral, because I can handle it."

"Is that arrogance or confidence?" Hood challenged.

"It is arrogance born of confidence manifested by skill." Leonardo replied with just a hint of laughter when he saw Hood's slightly perplexed expression. "In short, have rights to be both because I have the skills to back up claims. I am confident for the masses, arrogant for myself."

"Dangerous," Hood grumbled, shaking his head. "Then again, the way you play military and politics isn't a way many have tried to and survived. So I guess you're entitled to _some_ bragging

rights."

Leonardo smiled and opened his mouth to reply when Majestic appeared on the desk's holopad, looking more or less distraught. "Majestic, what's the matter?" the Fleet Admiral asked.

"Admiral, the _Far Away_â€ she's gone, her Slipspace engine must have fired prematurely." Majestic replied, then flickered and a holographic image of the _Far Away_ appearedâ€ it was there, then, it was gone as a ball of light engulfed it, shrunk away and revealing but empty space. Majestic's angelic avatar reappeared. "The envoys are gone with it."

Leonardo stared at the image, watching it play out and when it was back to Majestic, he narrowed his eyes and steepled his fingers before his face as he leaned forward slightly. His posture relaxed despite the harsh aura that the Fleet Admiral was giving off. "Play it again."

"Yes, Admiral."

The video played again. Leonardo watched, again his eyes narrowed and the air grew more harsh but with his eyes moving through a variety of emotions, Hood could see the man was thinking heavily, trying to catch something. "Again."

It played a third time. "Again."

"What are-" Leonardo cut Hood off. "Stop."

The video froze. The explosion, or rather, the slipspace bubble was at its height, the Far Away was engulfed entirely. Leonardo stared hard, then reached over and tapped a key on his desk, the floor at the center of the office split and revealed a giant holoprojector. He stood and moved over to its side. "Majestic, bring that frame onto the projector."

"Yes, Admiral."

The giant projector activated and the Fleet Admiral was treated to an explosion three times his size. "Now, magnify twenty onâ€" he reached up, tapping a part of the clip. "Here." Majestic did as ordered and they zoomed on the spot in question. Hood himself watched and saw it now as well.

"What is that?" he mumbled, standing and moving to Leonardo's side.

"Enhance, maximum setting." The Fleet Admiral ordered.

The imaged enhanced itself, and soon enough they could see what it was. A shape, moving in the blackness of spaceâ€ only briefly illuminated by the Slipspace bubble of the engine misfiring. The Fleet Admiral and his mentor narrowed their eyes.

"A pelican?" Hood goggled staring intently at the shape, it was still difficult to see. But it was small, casting a shadow and moving away from the now gone _Far Away_.

"It would seem," Leonardo frowned, standing back. "What ship captured

this video?" he asked aloud.

"The UNSC _Third Valley_, Admiral." Majestic replied.

"Bring me all the ship locations data on a TacMap at the time of the explosion." Leonardo said, tone resolute as he stepped back and gestured for Hood to do the same. When both men were away back the images shifted and a square Tactical Map of the time appeared. Listing all the UNSC and Sangheili ship locations, even the enemy fleet locations. The _Far Away _being between the UNSC fleet and the UNSC one as a form of middle ground. Leonardo didn't recall approving that little action, but he pushed it aside, this wasn't the time to nitpick at Admiral Lasky's conduct.

"Highlight the location of the object."

A circle appeared in the map, and he frowned. "Assuming it's a Pelican, model one and place it at the angle until the shadow fits its silhouette from the light of the explosion." Leonardo said, thoughtful and now just a little agitated.

A moment passed, then a small Pelican appeared, and the way it was facing, the Fleet Admiral frowned further and his eyes were stormy. "I knew it, projected flight path puts it away from any of the fleets, friend or otherwise." he looked along the map into the blackness of space along its path, he wouldn't be able to see anything now space ate light like it was a sponge and it had been a small miracle he caught the odd shape in the recording, had they not been cutting the explosion so close he imaged he wouldn't have picked it up.

But he had, and now his best laid plans had a wrench thrown into them. And for Fleet Admiral Leonardo Petrov that was unacceptable. "I want the manifests for every coming and going Pelican at the time, check in times and logs. If anything looks off to you, Majestic, I want it brought to my attention immediately. Am I clear?" Leonardo asked.

"Understood, Admiral. Shouldâ€¦ I gather the Committee for an emergency meeting as well?"

"Yes," Leonardo nodded, turning away. "I need to nip this in the bud before it gets itself carried away." he made for the exit of his office. "Come on, Hood. Walk with me."

Hood followed, and together the pair made their way towards the committee room in silence, however, it was broken when Hood asked. "What are you thinking?"

Leonardo grunted. "If it is a Pelican, it was flying away from the fleets, so, it was either in a really big rush and didn't have time to fly anywhere else, or it was moving to get picked up. Assuming it hasn't reported in on the reports that Majestic is getting me, then that means it never docked on any ship afterwards." He and Hood entered an elevator, and as it descended. Leonardo added, "So, what does that mean?"

"Prowlerâ€¦" Hood frowned deeply, his age showing further on his features. "Which means the Office of Naval Intelligence. But that doesn't make any sense, what does offing the peace envoys get

them?"

"They're ONI," Leonardo replied tersely. "They're well aware of my strong stance against them and their little operations, not to mention their flair for the overly dramatic. I wouldn't be surprised if they're going to attempt to use this to discredit me, if not for the fact an accident happened on my watch."

The doors parted and they stepped out and along.

"Still, even for them, this is shady."

"They are the shadows, Hood," Leonardo seethed. "And they've been looking for every reason to try and bring me down from Fleet Admiral, this could be a kick they need to at least have some favor pulled away from me. And that I will not allow, not by ONI and certainly not by those xenophobic idiots on the committee who care more about getting favor with their fellow committee members than forwarding humanity, and by addition, all the galaxy's interests as a whole."

Hood raised a brow. "Where is this coming from?" he asked with a just a tinge of concern.

Leonardo sighed, closing his eyes and taking a breathe to calm his nerves. "Forgive me, Hood." he gave a rueful smile. "I guess this is just my petty nature showing itself, I hate it when my plans are interrupted, just the fact it likely is ONI only adds to my annoyance of this situation."

"You never were a graceful loser," Hood jabbed, trying to lighten his apprentice's mood before they met with the committee.

"Which is why I rarely do." Leonardo chuckled, lifting his eyes to stare ahead as they upon the committee room. "Time to feed the jackals, then the vultures" and then the masses." he sighed.

Hood patted his back sympathetically. "It's your job now."

"Heh," Leonardo chuckled. "Amen to that."

* * *

><p>Turian Colony Falcus, 2148. Citadel Calendar.
Falcus Capital, Xellis. Calene Here*****'*****zia. 18:00 Cycles.

>Celene couldn't believe it, the local Turian forces had been beaten" the most powerful military force in the galaxy to date, next only to the Krogan at the height of the Rebellions and Rachni wars, had been bested by some unknown Aliens" and she couldn't bring herself to ask herself why when it had been quite clear their technology had been of an entirely different design than the Element Zero reliance technology she and the rest of the galaxy employed. Watching a ship so huge part the clouds and then moving along in atmosphere was both frightening and eye opening.

Their technology allowed them make such ships, they didn't need to go in for ground operations like they had. She knew from a few Active Time Strategy games that if you controlled space, you controlled the planet and yet they had come down to ground and fought, for what

purpose would they do that?

Whatever it was, it was obvious they were centuries ahead of the Turians, and by default the rest of the Council races. And such a thought was frightening, where had this new race been? Where did they come from? Did they just now stumble across the Mass Relays? If that was the case, they were either branching out violently or there was a bigger picture she wasn't getting.

But she was getting an elbow in the gut by a Turian inside a shelter, who wanted her tube of nutrient paste. She doubled over and resisted the urge to whimper, his friends, two other Turians, held her up. "Suit rat," the leader sneered, "Nice of you to make a contribution to us like this. I'll remember you fondly while I eat."

And I'll remember you fondly when I shoot something, Celene thought with a bite of her lip as the two Turians at her sides let her go, walking away after their boss. She groaned, wrapping an arm around her waist. That was going to bruise for sure, still it hadn't been the worse encounter she'd had with the species and she was grateful for that. She sighed, wondering if maybe she could get the dispenser to give her another tube of nutrient paste.

Then again it would probably be stolen as well. Such was the life of a Quarrian.

"Excuse me," the flanging trait only a Turian could make tipped her off to the speaker.

She sighed, "Sorry, you just lost your chance to take my nutrient paste," she looked up and then stood straight and snapped off what she assumed was a Turian styled salute. "Sorry, Comander, sir!" she said quickly, realising she had just spoken badly to none other than Commander of the local forces Desolas Arterius.

The Commander in question chuckled, mandibles twitching in his amusement. "At ease," he looked her over, when he spotted no rank, he added. "Civilian. I was merely going to ask if you needed a hand up, but with how fast you moved. I guess not."

"No, I was fine, sir," Celene could hardly relaxed, when high ranking Military figures took an interest in Quarrians, it wasn't because they wanted to help, unless it was to help the other party solidify their argument and get the Quarrian in question arrested. It was never good. "I should, probably be getting to my group." she still waited for his dismissal.

Desolas observed her a moment, then he nodded. "A wise decision, but before you go." he reached over and held out a fresh tube of nutrient paste, unopened and thus clean for her to eat. She stared, and he held it out further, "Take it, I give you my word it isn't a bomb." he said with just a hint of teasing.

"Commander!" Celene was made aware of another Turian behind Desolas, who was now looking at Desolas in a manner that she could only call surprised. "She's a-

Desolas raised a hand, and that immediately silence whatever the other was going to say about her, likely to call her a suit Rat, she silently appreciated it. "She's a civilian who had her food stolen,

Sergeant," he didn't break his gaze from Celene, which she knew was a bit of an insult when a commanding officer didn't face their subordinate. "I will not stand by and allow such to stand, regardless of her species. The fact you would disheartens me." Desolas went on with a soft sigh.

The other Turian appeared to have more words, but bit them back with a soft growl and turned away, stalking back to the group of military Turians inside the shelter. With the surrender of the local forces, the military had been disarmed and put into shelters and hospitals to tend to their wounded. While troops in the areas from the unknowns had been landed in and the wounded tended to in makeshift field hospitals.

In short? It was kinda cramped in the shelters.

Celene reached up, took the tube and pulled her hand back, looking at it, then to the Commander sheepishly. "Uh, thank you, Commander." she said finally, figuring he was owed some courtesy for his kindness towards her. "My name is Celene Here'zia."

He stared, then he asked. "Just Celene Here'zia? No Nar or Vas?"

That surprised her, most species didn't care for Quarian culture, let alone the significance of the Nar or Vas and ship names in their titles. The fact Desolas was asking was enough to almost completely defuse her from her earlier fears, almost. "No, I don't plan to return to the Migrant Fleet, so those parts of my name are no longer needed." she replied, resisting the urge to meet his eyes.

"Hmm," Desolas hummed slightly in acceptance of the answer. "I see, so you've chosen to live outside the fleet," when she nodded, he did as well. "A tough decision, I'm sure. Considering the stigma on your species," seeing her hesitance to comment, he chuckled. "No need to hide your bitterness, my people can often be what was the word, boshits?"

"Bosh-tet." Celene corrected, finding herself almost laughing at his botching of the simple curse of her people.

"Ah," Desolas chuckled. "Of course, my mistake." he straightened out his uniform, then paused, considering his next words for a moment before he spoke. "Celene, not to call you a liar, but if you didn't have a group, would you mind sitting with me and my brother? I assure you, he doesn't bite, nor would I allow him."

Celene's alarms went wide now, both in suspicion and shock. "Uh, but, why would you have me sit with you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes slightly.

He raised his own in defense. "Nothing nefarious, simply because it would afford you the chance to eat your paste in peace and me with some interesting, less hard headed company." he joked, despite the lack of humor in her previous words.

She stared, then, slowly she shook her head. "Thanks for the offer, but I don't think that's such a good idea. Bye." with that, she turned and marched off back to her previous spot.

Desolas watched her go, when she was gone he turned over and made his way back to his brother's side. Sitting down and leaning back, he stayed silent. Until Saren broke it, 'What was that? You're above associating with their kind. Suit Rats, the lot of them." his brother muttered.

The Commander rolled his eyes. He loved his younger brother, he really did. Saren was brilliant, driven and full of talent. But he was also hard headed, and not so creative outside of combat. He believed all the propaganda of the galaxy, Turians were superior, Asari to be constantly respected, such things. Desolas had always tried to teach him to see underneath the underneath, that books should never be judged by their covers lest you lose the full story, It was slow going, but he was making progressâ€| very slow progress.

"Saren," Desolas began, figuring he should explain this in a way that would make his brother more understanding. "With these newcomers coming in and showing us up," he raised a talon, silencing his brother about the unknowns "showing them up", "The council will be needing more hands on deck, that includes allies they'd never consider before. And which two species would they be bringing back into their good graces?"

"Krogan and Quarrians." Saren said as it dawned on him. "Theseâ€| humans would push us to do that? To rely on those traitorous and thieving racesâ€|"

"It is the only way we could possibly possess a shot at standing against them, and that's just standingâ€| it will be a miracle if we ever possess the strength to active fight and win." Desolas shrugged his shoulders, leaning his head. "So, we have to make friends. And the best way to make friends is simpleâ€|" he closed his eyes.

Soon enough, Celene joined them, mumbling about how her group filled her spot. To which Desolas quipped, "Of course they did, welcome to our little group." she just rolled her eyes and ate in silence.

"It begins with one friend, Saren," he said to his brother as Celene ate. And the lesson was over, start with one and you'll make another and only more would follow.

* * *

><p>End of chapter thirteen

There it is, folks! Chapter thirteen of In Infinitum: First Contact! And now with that outta way, I can go back to Armored Core and Code Geass. Also, heads upâ€| I may or may not be putting mechs in this thing once it starts picking up more, I meanâ€| I'm just so mech'd up right now! HOOAH!â€| Anyways, y'know the drill, read, review and have a nice day/night!

15. Chapter fourteen

__**Author Note: **__Now, you're all probably mentally punching me in the gut, patting my back and all that for taking this long to update. And I have to tell youâ€| the reason I didn'tâ€| was because I had no clue how to do this chapter. Like, no fooling. No clue, I would

startâ€¦ got the scene with Shepard out done. And thenâ€¦ nada. I hate politics, I despise it. But yet I couldn't skip over such an integral part with a "JAZZ HANDS!" explanation. You all deserved more. Soâ€¦ here it is. _

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Fourteen****

****January 10, 2582. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC Colony _Shanxi**_**, Prometheus System. 1100 Hours.**

>"He's still drinking, huh?" Sharps looked over from the table from where she and the rest of their ODS team were seated, well, all but Shepard, who was seated in the darker corner of the bar they were visiting while on their short Leave of Absence from duty due to being rescued as POWs. They'd be back on duty in the next day or so.

"He just lost his mother," MacMillan muttered from his spot, taking another shot of his Scotch. "I think he's entitled to a little heavy drinking." he sighed, closing his eyes.

"He keeps goings as he is, we'll be dragging his ass out of here." Wrecker frowned, having finishing his second drink himself and was contently leaning back against his chair while the news blared on about the destruction of the _Far Away_ and the entire loss of its crew due to technical failure of the Slipspace drive engine. A one in a million chance, and the _Far Away_ had been the one.

And as they watched their newest member of the team sit in the lonesome corner with a metaphorical dark cloud over his head. They had to agree that what a chance it was, It was this time that the news announced that the next envoy had been chosen, and for security purposes, had been already been launched to go meet their neighbours who's planet they practically ripped from them.

Which brought up another series of questions in itself, why even conduct ground operations? Control space, control the planet. Then again, knowing the brass it was likely to test the enemies' infantry and vehicle tactics, learn about your enemy and all that jazz, it personally wasn't Wrecker's place to question why Command did this or that, he followed the Lieutenant and Captain, that was good enough for him.

But the real question of the hour was what were they going to do about Shepard? Sharps was right, if he kept drinking like he was he'd out like a light within the next half hour.

"Maybe someone should go talk to him?" Wrecker suggested finally, looking back at the others, the only not joining them was Ares, who had decided that drinking wasn't the best way to spent short times off.

"And what would we say?" Beef muttered, crossing his arms over his chest after setting down his empty glass. "We can't exactly talk away the fact his mother checked out on galactic news."

The others fell silent when they saw Shepard slam set his third empty glass down, push his chair out and stand, rolling his shoulders and

stretching his arms out a moment before he turned to them, eyes half lidded, but there was a clarity to them. He moved over them, and spoke. "Alright, I'm squared away." he told them, "Lets get outta here, find some good food."

The team exchanged looks, Beef was the one who voiced their concern, "You sure, son?"

"Do I look unsure?" Shepard replied raising an eyebrow in turn. "I'm fine, LT, just had to get some alcohol in me, feel sorry a bit and justâ€¦ get my head around the idea, yeah? Least I still got my dad." he chuckled mirthlessly, "Nowâ€¦ lets go, I think I saw a steakhouse on the drive here."

He turned, and marched for the exit. The team shared another look, Wreck eventually shrugging, "I won't turn down some food." he said, following after the Lance Corporal.

Sharps sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose briefly before following as well. With a frown Macmillan downed the rest of her drink, set down the glass and paid for them, then jogged after his team. He just hoped Shepard did short his shit, he didn't need him breaking down in some horrible way in the middle of a stressful situation.

Shepard himself walked towards the exit, and once he cleared it he barely registered that he had bumped into someone else, momentum sending both to the ground, Shepard onto his ass and the other person catching himself and staying on his feet. "Sorry about that," Shepard sighed, just great. He looked up, and paused in surprise and disbelief. "â€¦Kai?"

"John?" The man, Kai replied, dark hair tied back in a pony tail, wearing civilian clothing, the sleeveless jacket he wore showed off the old ODSST tattoo on his shoulder, along with the two scars running across it, dark eyes stared down at him. And for a moment, then pair watched, as if waiting for the first move.

And it happened, Shepard's lips twitched into a small smile. "You bastard!" he got up quickly, and aimed a playing punch for his friend's gut, who slapped it to the side and wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him down and laughed.

"Too slow, John," Kai chuckled, watching his old friend struggle to get out of his hold a moment before letting him go and adjusting his jacket, shaking his head. "Where the hell have been?" he asked as Shepard righted himself.

"Me?" John blinked, patting himself on the chest before shaking his head. "How about you? I haven't seen you since you left for Dropshock boot three years ago! You don't write, don't text, hell, I honestly you died on some secret mission and had the records removed for it." John crossed his arms, grinning now. "Clearly not the case, but still!"

Kai laughed, shrugging before he replied. "Oh, I've been around, and sorry for disappearing, just my assignments keep me busy, I'm going to and fro so much I feel like space is my home and not solid ground," he patted the pavement with his foot for emphasis.

"Shepard?" Sharps asked, looking at the pair, along with the rest of Delta-7. "Friend of yours?"

"Oh, right!" Shepard chuckled, sheepish as he gestured to Kai. "Delta-seven, this is Kai Leng," he turned to Kai then, "Kai, this is my team, Delta Seven." he pointed to Jen, "You have Sharps," then to Gary, "Wrecker," next was Macmillan. "Slate, though we just call him Captain." and the last was Marcus. "And that's Beef."

"Hey," Sharps offered a wave.

"Yo." Wrecker said, offering a smaller wave. Macmillan and Beef just nodded after regarding Kai.

Kai bowed his head to them a moment, then raised it, offering a polite smile. "Hello to you all, so, you must be John's ODST team then?" when they gave their confirmation, he nodded, crossing his arms. "I was with the service, up until a year ago, had to leave in favor of a new job opportunity."

Shepard rolled his eyes, "Let me take a guess, ballet instructor?" he grinned shortly after, then ducked a quick jab that Kai threw at him. "Hah!"

"We don't talk about that time in my life," Kai said, narrowing his dark eyes at the ODST, "Childhood friends or not, I. Will. Bury. You." he warned, crossing his arms and looking miffed, but the amusement behind his eyes spoke of the truth, Kai Leng wouldn't hurt him.

"So, John," Kai said after his friend recovered from his laughing fit. "How're your mother and father holding up? It's been awhile since I've seen themâ€¦ as wellâ€¦" he trailed off seeing John's expression falter, and then fall dramatically, "John?"

"My dad's with the Office of Naval Intelligence, a Liason between the Office and The committeeâ€¦" John sighed, shaking his head and crossing his arms, raising his gaze. "My momâ€¦ she'sâ€¦ well, she was on the Far Away." silence hung between him and his old friend, even as dozens of people passed them, as his team stood silent behind him. Neither of them spoke.

Finally, it was Kai who broke the silence.

"I'm sorry, John," He spoke lowly, tone lacking the previous enthusiasm he had started with, now it seemed more heavy, weary. As if something was catching up with him. He stepped forward, raising a hand and placing it atop Shepard's shoulder, giving a brief squeeze. "I'll miss her too. She was a good woman, loyal, kind."

"I know," Shepard took a long breath in, then slowly exhaled and gave a brief grin. "But, silver lining? I meet my old friend, soâ€¦ I guess today isn't so bad, right?"

Kai frowned. He saw exactly what John was doing to himself, pushing it all down, his friend would handle work loads no other student would touch, in school and the military academy he was always a Grade-A student, he was good at combat, at puzzle solving, a leader with sharp instincts and he was scary fast. But when it came to

emotions, John was at his weakest. It was his weakness in an otherwise would be perfect soldier. And this was further proof.

"John," Kai saw his friend turn and that was when he, with great affection, buried a fist into his gut, causing the man to double over, gasping and holding his gut. "I thought I told you that if you ever said something lightly like that after something so serious, I'd punch you."

"You still remember that?" Shepard gasped, looking up with a wheeze. "That was seven years ago!" another coughing fit.

"My memory is very good." Kai replied smoothly. "Now stand up, all of you," he looked to the team of ODSTs and to John. "Are going to come with me to the total War Games arena, we're going to rent it and you're all going to show that ODST standards haven't dropped since I was in the service." he raised a brow, "Good? Good. Come along." he turned, and walked along, fully expecting to be followed.

Shepard stood, rubbing his now sore stomach. "That's going to bruise," he muttered, rolling his neck and looking at the others, "Not like we've got anything better to do, we're not exactly on the front lines to making history, are we?" He said, shrugging and moving after Kai.

The rest of the team exchanged looks, then collective sighs before moving along. Shepard had a point, and it was his grieving time, least they could do was go along with it.

They just hoped this envoy didn't get blown up.

* * *

><p>Widow System, 2145, 18:00 Cycles. Citadel
Calendar.
Citadel Station, Council Meeting room. The Citadel
Council.

>Tevos was thanking the Goddess that the new envoy hadn't been lost to such a catastrophic malfunction, such as that had befallen the previous envoy. Though it had bought her, Sparatus and Valern some time to plan their terms and mentally prepare themselves for the arrival of their new, hopefully by the time this meeting was over, ally in galactic peace. She wasn't blind, she knew that they were weak at the bargaining table in this instance. They'd attacked first, they had followed all the rules but they were still in the wrong.

Then again, they wouldn't be in the wrong had the Turians succeeded, but that was politics. The losers were wrong and the winners were right. And this United Nations Space Command were certainly the winners this time around, she'd accept that and move onto the more important objective of peace. If that couldn't be attained this day, then the council was looking at a galactic war once again.

And this time _Tevos thought, closing her eyes. _We might not be able to regain what was lost._ The thought rooted in her mind, she rolled her neck, the only sign of her nervousness at the situation. She and the other councillors had to get this done, they had to buy for peace and when it was attained, they had to be careful how they proceeded.

"_Councillors_," Their Omni-Tools pinged them, it was the Dock Master. A Turian. "_The UNSC envoy has arrived, theyâ€| just appeared out of those portals in the middle of the station. They're requesting docking clearance_."

Valern spoke, "Grant them it. Allow their shuttle to dock at the specified location we've sent youâ€|" a tap of a key on his Omni-Tool. "Now."

"_Of course, Councillor_." the communication line closed.

Sparatus looked upwards, sure enough through the window. One of their "frigates" was floating in the vast space between the Citadel's Warding arms. It looked like a toy at this distance, but the Turian had scene all available combat footage of their ships in action. It's main gun could tear apart a Dreadnaught's shields in a single hit. It had laser and ballistic point-defense weaponry that could shred fighters and even other vessels. There was no doubt in his mind that their envoy was also aware of these facts.

But that was the point of this meeting, wasn't it? They were the Citadel council, they were the single most powerful galactic power to grace the galaxy since the Protheans disappearance fifty-thousand years ago. It was this council that had prevented, and caused, its share of wars since its formation and it was from the Citadel Station they lead the galaxy.

A station that was now vulnerable. The enemy they had provoked didn't rely on the Mass Relays, nor Eezo technology. No, they were advanced in ways that still made his mind spin and his inner tactical commander marvelled at their weaponry, old slugs along with state-of-the-art energy weaponry. They couldn't win, not this war. Not as they were, even if all the citadel combined, the odds were for all intents and purposes not at all favourable.

And Sparatus wasn't a betting man, he didn't gamble. He calculated and he made the best possible actions from those calculations, and in his time as a soldier it had taken him from grunt to officer to commander of the Black Watch, the best of the best. He had commanded Black Operations personally. Oversaw others and even personally green lighted each and every one of them.

So, they would try for peace and if they got it, they would use it to its fullest, they would build their power and ensure they could at least stand beside the UNSC in terms of military might, only then would the Citadel and all its species be safe from invasion and utter annihilation. At least for the time.

"Looks like the envoy is in the elevators now," Valern said, drawing his fellow Councillors attentions. "Security feed, he has four armed escorts, as per our order their pathway along the path is being overwatched by the Special Response teams of Citadel Security, and four of Spectres." he mumbled, looking at them. "As long as no one gets rowdy. We should be in the clear."

"Don't let the Spirits hear you, Valern," Sparatus warned you, "Ancestors know we're tense enough as it is without you possibly jinxing us this close to the show." he warned, his mandibles twitching as his own sign of nervousness.

"Ah," Valern relented, a small smile tugging at his lip. "Of course, forgive me." he checked his Omni-Tool again. "They're making their way across the Presidium commons now." he informed them, tone level as if he were just mentioning it was yet another wonderful sunny day on a planet known for its fair weather.

It seemed of the three, it was Valern who was the most stable during these times. Then again, you didn't get to his position with emotional outbursts and twitchiness. Sparatus and Tevos supposed.

If they were crossing the Presidium then they'd be here in the main meeting chambers within the next minute or so. Tevos shifted on her feet, glancing around, they'd emptied the council tower meeting chambers for this, only the required guards posted at their stations were present, beyond that, it would just be the council and the envoy along with the envoy's guards, four of them, not a large number.

As the seconds ticked by, the elevator at the far end of the large chamber opened, revealing four black clad figures, holding large, bulky weapons with secondary weapons strapped to their hips. Between their box formation was a man in white and gold attire. A formal hat adorned his head.

As they proceeded closer, up the stairs towards the council podium, Tevos steeled her expression, beside her Sparatus and Valern did the same. And together, they watched the as the five humans, escorted by two Turians, who split off to the side and took their stations at the base of the final set of stairs.

And now, here they were. The four guards stepped to the side, standing in a line behind the white suited human, who stayed at his position, hands behind his back and looking up at the council, who together stepped forward as one.

The meeting begun.

"We are pleased to welcome you to our station, ambassadorâ€|?" Tevos started gently, waiting for him to offer his name to them so they may who is speaking on behalf of the UNSC.

That was when the man blinked, and then, he spoke, possessing an accent she'd never heard, then again. Human language, "English" wasn't something was an expert at. "I'm not the ambassador, Councillors, just the stand in incase something happened on the way here." the man stepped back, bowing his head to one of the black clad soldiers.

Said soldier stepped forward, holding out his weapon the man in white, along with the sidearm. He stepped forward as the man stepped into his place in the line left open. The soldier walked forward a few paces, then reached up for its helmet.

"Forgive me, Councillors," the soldier, a male, gripped his helmet. "For my methods, but after what happened to the Far Away, I felt some caution was in order." the helmet lifted, and it revealed a younger man with an almost apologetic smile, he held his helmet with one hand while it hung at his side. He dusted off his breastplate and looked up to them. "But, where are manners, allow me to introduce myself."

"My name is Leonardo Altrove Damascus Petrov," he gave a gracious bow, standing up again and finishing. "Ambassador and Fleet Admiral for the United Nations Space Command of Humanity." Leonardo's smile widened.

Tevos was surprised, she didn't think the ambassador would be a man so young, least, he appeared young. But Asari standards he couldn't have been more than a the Maiden stage of youth. "It is understandable, Ambassador," she said, offering a shake of her head at his apology. "The tragedy concerning your first envoy, I hope you know you have our deepest condolences."

Sparatus and Valern nodded mutely. Their eyes were on the human, Leonardo. Sparatus' was like a Speera, the raptor of their kind, eyes sharp as daggers, assessing the man. Valern appeared more curiously gracious, then assessingly hostile.

"Yes, nasty bit of business, that." Leonardo sighed softly, before standing forward and placing his hands against the rails, looking up at them, and the way his eyes moved over her and the others made it seem like he was looking into their very beings. Looking for deception, treachery. "But I didn't come here to discuss the _Far Away _incident," he said, standing straight.

"I came here to discuss your terms for peace," He spoke, tone of gentle friendliness sharpening just a tad, just enough for Tevos to notice it had done so. The man carried himself with an air of confidence, of fearlessness. He was in control of himself, and knew his assets. "I'm sure we've all seen enough of this business on Falcus, I pronounced that correctly, yes? Falcus Colony, belonging to your kind," he nodded to Sparatus. "Turians."

"You're correct," Sparatus confirmed, tone formally neutral. "On both accounts, we are tired of the business at Falcus and its pronunciation. Councillor Tevos speaks the truth, and while it cannot bring back the lives, I do regret the loss of life you've suffer for my peoples actions."

"You've nothing to regret, Councillor." Leonardo laughed suddenly, shaking his head and smiling. "Ah, where are my manners, seems you've been kind enough to ask for my name, but I've yet to ask yours," he said, gesturing to them. "May I have your names?"

"I am Councilor Sparatus, of the Turian Hierarchy." Sparatus supplied, crossing his arms. He didn't like this man, something about his attitude grated at him, he was formal, cheery and something about the way the man looked at them bugged Sparatus in a way he couldn't pinpoint.

"I am Councillor Valern, of the Salarian Union." Valern bowed his head. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Ambassador and Fleet Admiral Leonardo Altrove Damascus Petrov."

"Please, Councillor," Leonardo chuckled, waving his hand. "Just Leonardo will do, It will get tiring saying my full name, believe me. Some of my formal staff tried."

Valern nodded, glancing at his fellow councillors, then back to Leonardo.

"And I am Councillor Tevos, of the Asari Republics," She bowed her head graciously. "A pleasure, Ambassador Leonardo."

Leonardo bowed his head back. "I admit, the resemblance between my species females and yours, Councillor Tevos, has me a bit surprised." he admitted with a laugh. "I didn't expect it."

"You mentioned Fleet Admiral," Sparatus spoke above the small tidbit of conversation, eyes narrowing on Leonardo. "What exactly are you, Ambassador? I get the feeling you're more than a politician." he accused, arms uncrossing and instead they hung at his side.

Leonardo looked to Sparatus, then appeared thoughtful before smirking, "Ah yes, well, Fleet Admiral, this rank would be akinâ€| well," He nodded to Sparatus, "In your terms, I would be the Primarch, Dalatrass and High Matriarch." he watched as their expressions shifted, eyes widening in surprise, he relished their surprise. "I lead the entirety of the United Nations Space Command. In short, every Captain, every marine and ship in the UNSC falls under my jurisdiction."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "From your expressions, I take it you need a minute?" he cocked a brow.

Tevos was shocked, she was frozen. This manâ€| couldn't really be the military leader of the UNSC, could he? Why would the leader come for the negotiations? It wasâ€| unheard of, really. He was surrounded, if they had decided to take the envoy hostage, along with his shipâ€| they wouldn't stand a chance!

"Why would someone of your position come here with a single ship and meet us in person?" Sparatus asked, apparently overcoming his surprise, Valern appeared to be lost in thought still.

Leonardo stared, falling silent a more before he stepped forward. "I'm a man who believes in taking a personnel touch when the situation calls for it, I believe this called for it." He said, and something in his tone changed, there was a sharper edge to it. "Now, I know why you attacked my ships coming through that Relay. They were in violation of a galactic standing law. I understand and accept that, were I in your position I'd have done the same." he informed them, and his eyes glinted slightly. "But we're past all that and now I'm here to give you the terms of your surrender."

"Surrender?" Valern raised a brow, "I didn't realise we were surrendering."

Tevos had to agree, but she had a feeling from the look on Leonardo and Sparatus' faces that told her they too expected that question.

"Don't play coy, Councillors," Leonardo stood, arms behind his back as he stared up at them, but the way he carried himself he may as well have been above them. "You may kill me, my guards and before it can jump to Slipspace, my frigate as well. But you do, and I've left very clear orders to have my fleet jump to this station and reduce it to debris." he narrowed his eyes. "I came here today because men and women who were under my command, like my sons and daughters, died in an attack that while I understand it, was unprovoked. I applaud your

zeal to uphold the law."

He spun around gesturing to the station. "It's a beautiful thing, you have here. A marvel, really." He turned back to face them, eyes fiery. "And I would reduce it all to nothing. I am going to make this clear to you, Councillors. I am a patient man, a forgiving man. But not a weak man. I will return your colony and all captured personnel, and in turn you shall do so to my men. We will leave your designated space, and we shall stick to our side of that line." A pause, "You will also pay compensation for our losses, and you shall receive some from us for yours. To make it fair."

"Furthermore, our two governments may communicate and trade, via the Shanxi relay as a travel route, as that's the only Relay into our space that we've found. All ship access between our two sides will of course have to be approved by selected officials on both sides, any trading goods will be strictly medical, food and recreational supplies. No weapons or armor, those may come with time." Leonardo further explained, and Tevos found herself swallowing under the intense gaze of the human who was now listing off his demands.

"Once we both feel our governments are over the tensions of what has happened between us, then we'll discuss more open communication and commercial trading, hopefully from there we can build a stable partnership." Leonardo stepped back, crossing his arms. "These are the terms, fair I'd say considering you've nothing to bring to the table." he called them out.

And non a single one of them could retort otherwise. Military wise, they couldn't win, diplomacy was the only thing they had. Still, something occurred to Tevos, "Why such time to build a partnership?"

"Humanity and violent first contact don't mix well, I'll leave it at that for now," Leonardo paused, then added. "I'll await your answer to my terms. Get in touch with whoever you need to for it. I'm sure this will all be blown over after a year or two but, I warn you Councillors."

He narrowed his eyes, frowning etching onto his lips. "Should you attack Humanity again, I will not hesitate to order the destruction of your fleets, military installations, this Citadel and whatever else I need to destroy in order to ensure my people are kept safe from harm. Am I clear?"

Tevos bit her lip, who the human was perfectly clear. He had a metaphorical gun to their heads and there wasn't a single thing they could do about it. He had proven it by coming himself, the military leader of the Human forces, had come before them and told them exactly what he expected them to do. And they couldn't fight it, not as they were now.

The UNSC tech overshadowed their own by decades, their fleet and ships were probably beyond their own as well and they too had allies, the unknown fleet that had helped them captured their response fleet proved that. This was a foe they couldn't beat, their only option was to bide their time and submit.

"We will have your terms met within a day or two, Ambassador," Valern said with a nod, his expression again neutral. "Will you be staying

on the Citadel? If so, we can provide accommodations suitable to a man of your status."

"No, thank you, Councillor," Leonardo suddenly smiled, pleased at their acceptance. He wouldn't need to apply more pressure, it seemed. "I'll be returning to my Frigate, you can contact me there, it will remain here until we receive an answer. If we're done here?" Tevos and Sparatus nodded, Leonardo smiled. "Then I bid you all farewell." he spun on his heel. "Back to the elevator, we're going back to rest."

And as they left, The Councillors of the Citadel Council, all released their collective postures, relaxing as the human man, Leonardo, disappeared into the elevator.

"That went better than expected," Valern stated.

"It did," Sparatus mumbled, clearly not too pleased they had to accept it as was, but there was little choice. Leonardo knew he held all the cards and chips, least now there would be peace. Enough for them to rebuild, to become stronger. First thing first, they needed to bring the Quarians and Krogan back into the fold and other loose ends had to be met.

They needed to also bring the Terminus systems under heel, those resources and free space would be essential for efforts to grow. But not yet, not just _yet_. One thing at a time.

* * *

><p>End of Chapter fourteen

Welp, there it is! I know a lot of you wanted to see the UNSC kick total ass, likeâ€| no/minimal losses, but I had to even it outâ€| so here's Leonardo, kicking total ass to the big shotsâ€|with words! Hope it was enjoyable. Bye for now!

16. Chapter Fifteen

**Author's Note: Since I felt last chapter was a tad small for such a long update time, I typed this up quickly and tada! Enjoy, my readers. ****Enjoy**_**.*)_

In Infinitum: First Contact

Chapter Fifteen

**Widow System, 2145, 11:50 Cycles. Citadel Calendar.
>Citadel Station, Council Meeting room. The Citadel Council.
**Two weeks had passed since the United Nations Space Command had all but handed the Citadel Council races their collective asses at Falcus, first in the actual taking of the Colony and then when the Council put together its "response" fleet, a fleet that had been captured and held in a killing ground for the better part of the diplomatic part of the ordealâ€| which lasted all of five minutes where the Human military leader, Leonardo Petrov, had told them in person in a very forward fashion that if they should step out of line again they'd be put down. _Hard_. That was why Sparatus had arranged for some old faces to meet with the Citadel Council, again, along. In these

troubled times they couldn't risk anything slipping to what had become the "Iron Curtain" that was the Shanxi-Falcus Relay point.

It was those two relays that linked UNSC space to Council space, at least, for the council. Sparatus knew that was a once sided thing, the UNSC didn't need the relays, their Slipspace engines, while proven dangerous, rendered the Relays almost entirely useless in terms of tactical advantages. With their ability to merely punch in coordinates, fit the fabric of reality a new one and go through and pop out another end anywhere in the galaxy so long as they had the chart data made it abundantly clear that their plans to grow and become strong enough to challenge the UNSC would need to be almost perfect.

Hence was he, Tevos and Valern were standing perfectly composed as four familiar figures that had never been seen inside the Council Chambers for a century. The Quarians Admiralty Board, the ruling body of what was the Nomadic Quarian's Migrant Fleet, what was left of the Quarian people. This was their own Council.

It was a smart move, Sparatus admitted as he gazed down the shifting feet of the four present, only one didn't shift under his intense gaze that was the Admiral of Heavy Fleet, Admiral Loris' Vakku Vas Vindicator, or V-3 as he had become known to the Turian Intelligence, a thing they did indeed have since relying on the STF came with strings, a lot of them. The Admiral was a thorn in the Hierarchy's side simply because he loved to skirt the edges of Turian and Salarian Space, he tended to leave Asari alone, though that was probably because of the three races it was the Asari Republics who chose to give the fleet some minor supplies, and three years ago, an outdated cruiser that had been converted to said Admiral's flagship, the Vindicator.

Loris decided to speak since everyone seemed to have forgotten they were in a meeting. "Councillors, as much joy as it brings me to stand down here and be ogled by those of higher power like yourselves. I have a fleet to lead and a family awaiting my return as do we all, so, with all due respect, may I ask why you've summoned us to the Citadel?"

Sparatus frowned slightly. Another personality quirk of Loris' was his extreme dislike of the Turian species, he was otherwise neutral to Valern and Tevos, but Sparatus saw just plain contempt in his glowing eyes. He hated Turians. "Of course, Admiral," Sparatus spoke evenly, he'd not rise to Loris' attitude, too much was at stake for this to be ruined by outbursts. He looked to Tevos, a silent signal she should take the lead now.

The Asari stepped forward and collected herself in an instant. "We apologize for the abrupt calling of this meeting, Admiral's, I realize such short notice must have been inconvenient for you-"

"Oh no, that would imply we aren't already inconvenienced by lacking a homeworld." Loris cut in, now his bitter tone wasn't hidden, he glared at the council, eyes narrowing.

"Loris!" One of his fellow Admiral's admonished him with a hiss. "Remember who you're addressing."

"Oh, I'm well aware, Fera, very well aware." Loris responded just as

lowly.

"Forgive him, Councillors," another, this one adorned in more golden and black wrappings about her suit, she bowed her head. "While abrupt, we understood the message was of great importance, we are curious to hear why you've called us here, if you would kindly explain?" she tilted her head.

Sparatus knew her as well, she was a soft spoken Quarian to sure and the second newest Admiral to the board, Admiral Vierra' Sora Vas Speeraph. She was Admiral of the Civilian fleet. She was noted as being charismatic via their intelligence reports, and from her stand, confident, he could see she was sharper than she appeared.

Tevos smiled warmly at her, she was certainly more likeable than Loris. "Of course, we summoned you four here as the heads of your respective fleets and as such, is it safe to assume you are the ruling body of the Quarian people?" When three of the gave their assent, Loris just grunted what sounded like "Obviously". Tevos continued. "That is why, it has recently been brought to our attention that your people sentence of exile has been going on too long, far, far too long." she shook her head.

And Sparatus and Valern noted the stiffening posture of their Quarian audience. They took the bait, at least partially. "What Councillor Tevos says is true, due to the actions of your ancestors, leading up the creation of the Geth, the council members Vyras, Nuka and Shiralee sentenced your people into exile until they felt that your people had repaid their crimes against the galactic community." He raised his Omni-Tool. "And for decades, going on two centuries, this standing has held as future Councillors never touched the vote due to obvious discrimination and biased opinions concerning the Geth, which have stayed behind the veil since your sentencing." he looked down to them. "Until today, your sentence has never been brought to Council ears."

"And what," Loris spoke up now, while his fellow Admirals were standing there, like dazed Pyjack's in the way of a charging Krogan Berserker, he wasn't so easily enamoured by pretty words and "niceness" that was two centuries overdue. "Made the _all powerful _Council bring our people's plight to their grand agenda?"

Sparatus might have winced or gotten angry were he a lesser Turian, All powerful—such a statement in these was nothing less than a proverbial slap to the face. Ever since their "ceasefire" with the UNSC two weeks ago there were more than a few naysayer's who began to question the true power of the Citadel Council, already there was talk among lesser races political parties that were "entertaining" the idea of possible making deals with the UNSC and becoming business partners.

These ideas were just whispers for now, but if Sparatus and his fellow Councillors didn't act fast, they'd probably lose more support and power. The losses at Falcus were still being dealt with, and even the Primarch's position was threatened, every day his powerbase chipped away, Sparatus estimated it would be within a week that the Primarch would "respectfully step down" and he replaced. It pained Sparatus, Primarch Fedoran was a close friend and a fellow Black Watch Commander, but he couldn't do anything for him. His neck was already in the noose, the coming days were just his march to the

gallows.

No, his friend was lost and would be swept aside, disgraced. Sparatus had to focus on the Citadel as a whole now, as his position as Councillor demanded. "As I said, before no other Councillors have dared to broach the topic, but with our recent appointment and it being forwarded by Councillor Tevos, we agreed that it was high time we allowed your species a second chance to rejoin the Galactic Community once again."

"With Interest," Valern added from his perch, crossing his arms. "Consider it our formal apology for our predecessors overzealous actions towards your people." The Salarian said, tapping his Omni-Tool, as if busy.

"And what are these interests, Councillors?" Vierra asked, regaining her composure to ask the question that was on her and fellow Admiral's minds as they listened to the council speak about what every Quarian would consider a surreal situation.

"Well, for starters, full membership into the Citadel, your embassy will be returned along all political statuses removed at the time of your exile." Valern replied easily. "Along with that, you will also be given three Garden Worlds, one from each of our respective Governments, as a gift from all the council. You are free to colonize these worlds as you see fit.'

"C-Colonize?" Admiral Vierra stepped back, shock evident in her posture. "Three worlds?" it was unheard of—three worlds, theirs, the Quarian peoples, no such offer had ever been extended, no such offer had ever dared to be dreamed of. And yet here they stood, the Admiralty Board of the Quarian Fleet, being offered three planets.

But, that was the thing wasn't it? What brought all this? No, Vierra knew it was more than simple "nice" for the Council, she and Loris both knew it, but while she was clever and restrained, he was brash and loud. He was a good commander, but he needed to learn to shut up and just listen for once.

She could already guess the reasoning behind this sudden burst of generosity. This had to do with the Humans and their allies introduction into the galaxy some weeks ago, they'd gotten the scattered Intelligence reports that said that the Council hadn't so much agreed to a cease fire as they were "told" to agree to one by the Human Envoy.

Nothing confirmed, of course but the news on the Extranet said all it needed to and help paint a picture of the Council's current status as "Beaten". So this was an obvious political move to get the Quarrians back into their good graces, likely for the technological and cybernetics advancements that they could provide given the natural aptitude for technology innate to Quarrians. They wanted better tech, they wanted more expertise and they were willing to give three planets away to get those assets.

"Along with the planets, we'll also be extending any financial or supply aid to colonization efforts, since we understand the Migrant Fleet isn't the most financially sound, we've also gone ahead and asked the races for added aid, The Elcor and Volus especially are

offering their own amount of funding to see the Quarian's brought back into stability." Tevos further explained, looking on with a gentle smile. "You've been robbed of this opportunity for a long timeâ€|"

"We're just sorry it took this long," Valern added his own two cents with a nod.

Sparatus then stepped forward, "We don't expect an answer right away, we understand if you need to confer with the rest of the Migrant Fleet." he paused when they seemed to consider, finally.

"We will go discuss this with the fleet Admirals, this isn't just our decision, this is the decision of the entirety of the Quarian people, Councillors. Weâ€|will need a bit of time to wrap our heads around this." Vierra said, bowing her head, "Lets go." she spun on her slender leg and walked off towards the elevator, the others, all but Loris followed them.

When Loris didn't leave Sparatus arched a brow plate. "Was there more you wanted to know, Admiral?" he asked calmly.

"Yes," Loris replied, tone oddly sombre, "I'm not going to pretend to look at your offer as anything other than what it is, what this all is. You think you can buy off the Quarian people with some planets, and credits to help us rebuild on said planets after your Council Exiled us. Any other time I might actually believe you," he scoffed lowly. "But look me in the eye and tell me this isn't just some ploy to get my people back into your clutches because you understand you now need all the manpower and technological assets you can get." he stepped forward.

"In the eye. Tell me that."

Valern moved to speak, and Sparatus raised a talon for him not to. "You want the truth, Admiral Loris?" Tevos spoke softly, looking at him with fierce eyes. "The truth is, yes, we need your people, their expertise and manpower. Just as you need us if you ever hope to regain any sort of footing in the galaxy ever again." Tevos said, cold. "We help the other, and we all benefit."

"And what is stopping us from going to the Humans? Perhaps they can offer us better," Loris crossed his arms, he noted the sudden tensing, ever so slightly, of their postures.

Tevos spoke again, tone just slightly less chilly. "And offer them what, exactly? You've a fleet of old ships, full of a people with a stigma placed against them over the last century and a half. Expertise on Technology? Their technology overshadows our own by decades, manpower? Their fleet took anything we could assemble hostage. You're caught between two forces, Admiral. So let me ask you."

Tevos stepped from the podium, making her way down the side and down onto the presentation floor, everyone watched as she moved until she stood before Loris, who stood taller than her by several inches, she stared into his blackened visor, eyes focused. "Do you join the side that needs youâ€| or go to the side that _may_ pity you?"

Loris stared right back, eyes just as focused as they searched hers

for more, she was sure that if he were any more intent on reading her she'd almost be impressed with how his eyes almost seemed to be trying to get at her very soul. Finally, he whispered, "And if the people who needed us were the ones who cast us out in the first place?"

"That was centuries ago, Admiral," Tevos didn't miss a step in their verbal match. "Times have changed, and now the Council, the Quarrians, everyone in this part of the galaxy will have to change with them, or be overshadowed by the Humans and their own allies."

And so, Tevos and Loris squared off, eyes unblinking, unwavering in their own resolve to search for a crack in the proverbial armor. They stood there for almost a minute before Loris finally stepped back, bowing his head. "We've had enough of pity and scorn," he said, looking up at them. "I myself want a personnel favor from all of you." He said, turning to face them.

"What is it?" Sparatus asked.

"All the Quarrians arrested for Vagrancy, I want them released, along with all Quarrians who've been put on notice for Vagrancy. I know a few other crimes are on the list but Vagrancy is a big cause of time for our people when we've no homes." Loris explained, narrowing his eyes. "Release these vagrants into the care of the Migrant Fleet, and come the end or new beginning, I will do my utmost to ensure the Quarrian people rejoin your ranks."

Tevos, Sparatus and Valern shared glances, finally. All three nodded, "You'll have your people returned to you within the day, Admiral." Tevos spoke gently.

"â€|Thank you, Councillors," Loris said, trying to sound pleasant as he bowed his head, he turned and moved after the other Admirals towards the elevator, they had waited for him. When he rejoined them, he was immediately spoken to by Vierra.

"What did you do?" there wasn't any accusation in her voice, but he could see the suspicion in her eyes.

"I told them what I thought, and then I asked them to release all Quarrians who were serving time for Vagrancy." Loris replied simply, looking up at her with a tiredness behind his eyes. "They agreed, our people will be release into the care of the Migrant Fleetâ€| my brother will be home again." he smiled slightly.

"I've not been a horrible older brother afterallâ€|" _Even if it cost the Quarrian people their soul._ He thought as they entered the elevator and began to ride back down to C-Sec. It had been a selfish thought covered up by righteousness, he wanted his brother outâ€| but he also got the others out.

"So, what do you think we should do, between the four of us?" Vierra asked once they were in the elevators. True, it would be up to the Quarrian people, but as the Admiralty board it would be they who met the Council and told them their answer.

Fera immediately blinked, staring at Vierra. "We should do it, three planets, ancestors! Three planets. And they'll probably be Dextro based, if they're gifting them to us! Garden worlds as well! This

offerâ€¦ it's too substantial to dismiss."

"I agree with Fera," the fourth Admiral said from his place, crossing his arms. He was Admiral of the Science Fleet, while not an official fleet, he did command a handful of science vessels and was the technological commander behind the Quarians more advanced retrofitted ships. "You also heard what she said, funding from Turian, Asari, Salarian, Elcor AND Volus governments, just the three council racesâ€¦ but two other side branches?" he looked them over.

"It's not the homeworld," Vierra mumbled to them, sounding dejected.

"Our homeworld is behind the veil, guarded by hordes of Geth ships, it's a gone dream," Loris closed his eyes at his own words. They stung him, since his father's grandfather would preach about his own ancestors stories about the homeworld, and those stories had been told to him. And now here he was brushing them aside in favor of a simple offer of convenience.

"It's time we looked past it, this offer by the Council represents our best chance to get back onto our feet as a people." He went on, glancing back at them. "We'd be fools not to take it, as much as I don't like it." A truth there. "But it's our only realistic option."

"We could try going to the humans?" Vierra offered, "They cowed the council into submission, they've more power, perhaps they-"

"They may take pity us," Loris turned to her, frowning. "Vierra, you know as well as I do the Council is only doing this because they need us now, our expertise and manpower, they want to become strong enough to challenge the Humans, and they're desperate enough to offer us three planets and funding to get us back onto the scene as quickly as possible." he paused, letting them absorb his words. "They need us, and they're obviously willing to pay us bigtime to ensure we become strong ourselves. I imagine it will only be a few short weeks until they bring the Krogan into this fold somehow."

A blink. "The Krogan? But they've got a grudge so big against the Council if you could make it into Eezo it might fuel an entire battle group for a year." Fera said, crossing her own arms across her chest. "What would make them join up with the council?"

"I don't know, that's my guess is all, but if you needed a strong fighting force, what species do you know have the guts to fight an enemy like the Humans and their allies if you promised them enough ships and guns to do it? Grudge or no, Krogan are mercenaries to the bone." Loris sighed, tilting his head back. "And I don't think going to the Humans would have been an option either, even if we voted that route."

"Why?" Fera asked.

A bitter scoff, "Because I doubt the council would let us, and if they found out we were going there, they'd stop us, by force, and with the Turians, they'd shoot us down, and our people would fade into extinction."

"You don't think they'd do it, would you?"

"I would," his fellow Admirals stood in shock at his words. "They see it is a war that's been paused, not lost, not yet. The years to comeâ€¦? It's going to be fought from the shadows, as the two groups grow closer they'll get bolder. Questions will arise, questions they'll want answers to, recon work, double agents and plots will be made."

"Espionage and Intelligence," Vierra sighed, hanging her head.
"Interesting times we live in."

"So, we all agree, it's extinction or the Council. And I'm for the Council."

"The Council," Fera nodded.

"Council," Vierra crossed her arms.

"Naturally, the Council." Admiral Yolre agreed.

"Then it's settled, now lets see what the Captains of the people say." Loris closed his eyes, job done. He'd done his part, now it was truly up to the mass voting of the ships captain's if they would rejoin the Council. He didn't bother thinking it would go any other way, Quarrians were so used to living with the bare minimum, that the idea they could be given more, and in such vastness, they would be won over easily.

There would be dissidence, of course, but they would matter little. Interesting times or not, Loris wouldn't allow anyone to threaten his little brother's dream of growing on a Quarrian owned planet, or to walk the streets without ridicule for simply existing.

This was for his brother, and if he had to sell himself for his brother's happiness. So be it.

* * *

><p>The Citadel Council.
**Valern listened to the Quarrian Admiral's speak amongst themselves inside the elevator, and by the end of that conversation he shut down the link and nodded to the others. "We've got the Admirals, and if STG calculations are correct the rest of the Quarrian people will jump at the offers we've made to them, the Quarrians will be ours." He reported, it had been a task, he admitted, getting the Dalatrass to agree that funding the Quarrians was the best action, but he had called in many favors, issued more than a few subtle threats and got her to change her mind when many of her advisors gave the go-ahead.

It was the Asari and Turians who were providing most of the backing, of course, the Salarian Union was to provide other services, which would be made known at a later date when they got the answer from the Quarrians. It was a high cost plan to get back into the fold, so much so that the Krogan would have to wait for awhile to get their chance at redemption.

But it was for the best, the Krogan would still be there after all was set and done. "Now, about the Volus and Batarian issues?" Tevos said once they'd retreated into the private council chambers, each one of her fellow Councillors taking a seat on the couch and getting

comfortable for the long talks ahead. "I can handle the Quarrians, which of these issues do you want to take?"

"It would make sense for me to handle the Volus, as they are a client race of the Turians," Sparatus replied, fetching them each a glass of fine Thessian wine, his was Turian Brandy, and when he sat, he continued. "But I want to handle the Batarian, no offense, Valern, but to handle those brutes, you need a bit of muscle."

Valern shook his head, lips quirking. "Feel free to, I've no patience for their kind anyway, I'll be happy to handle the transaction with the Volus, I trust we're still in agreement for the plan?" he raised a brow.

"Of course, Sparatus and I both agree that they've earned it," Tevos nodded, sipping her wine. "The Volus will be joining as the fourth Council seat."

Sparatus nodded, "We'll need their economic strength now more than ever, our future projects are going to put a strain on our banking endeavours as is." He received agreeing nods, he stared down into his brandy, watching the liquid shift as he swirled the glass idly, "And I'll be sure to make the Batarians understand that we won't be turning a blind eye to their slavery markets anymore."

"How do you intend to do that, anyway?" Tevos asked, perking a bit. "They're a stubborn species, afterall. It might be bigger headache than its worth trying to get them to fall into line."

"Leave that to me, Tevos, you just make sure the Quarrians are nice and content," Sparatus replied, downing back his glass in one go and setting it down, leaning back into the couch he stared at the ceiling. "What of our plans for the Krogan?"

"The Dalatrass won't budge," Valern said with a frown. "And I am in agreement with her, Humanity or not, curing the genophage is simply too big a risk, perhaps we could simply put a call for all Krogan Mercenaries?"

"Too expensive and with little guarantee of loyalty," Sparatus countered easily. "And the only way they'll play is if the Genophage cure is on the table. And we can't fabricate one. Tell the Dalatrass that if we don't get that cure, then we're two moves behind the Humans."

"We can't trust the Krogan either way," Valern replied, looking irritated at his Turian counterpart. "She won't part with the cure."

"She _has _to."

"Maybe not," Tevos said, drawing both their attention. She leaned back after setting her drink aside and placing her hands atop her lap. "I've been looking into other methods of searching for an effective military force that could rival the Krogan in effectiveness without all the unpredictability."

"And?" Sparatus said, both he and Valern's interest piqued. "What did you find?"

"A Krogan Warlord named Okeer," The Asari replied, and it made her fellows tense. Okeer was a Warlord, very old, and one of the few true Krogan scientists in the galaxy. "Recently, scout teams at the edge of the Terminus Systems have reported sightings of him from time to time, and his work." she explained, glancing at them both. "Until a week ago, when a team caught him. He was marked a HVT, and subsequently killed and his facility taken."

"And how does a dead Krogan mad scientist help us?" Valern asked, brows furrowing in thought about how all this fit together.

"His research data for one, is a colossal help," Tevos could see their eyes beginning to get a little annoyed with her drawing this out, so she stopped her teasing. "He'd perfected the art of cloning, Krogan, at least." And slow, realization dawned on their faces, so she went on. "The team found remains of what we're calling failures, Krogan clones, but their minds were unstable, violent brutes is all they were. But, we found one tank, one that Okeer himself was meticulously looking over. Reports stated he died fighting to ensure they didn't destroy it."

"And I'm assuming you didn't." Valern said, the pieces falling together. "Along with the research data, this clone and our more advanced technology, you're saying we could— what, clone our own army of Krogan?"

"Why not?" Tevos raised a brow in turn. "The clone is perfect, with Okeer's research data, the clone and our more state-of-the-art facilities, we have everything we need to pick up where he left off." She said, tilting her head. "They would be ours, and their training and indoctrination for loyalty could be handled via mental conditioning while growing up." she explained.

Sparatus fell silent, unsure, he looked to Valern. "Can it be done?" he asked, figuring it would be best to ask the most scientifically qualified of their ranks.

Valern looked thoughtful for a moment before he stood and began to pace about the room, Sparatus recognized it as a Salarian method for concentration, to "get the blood flowing" as it were. "Possibly, would require a good team of geneticists, a facility to grow and train said clones. We'd also require actual trainers for when the Clones come into maturity and need to be removed from their tanks." he said, listing off a few issues. "With data, and intact perfect clone, making them is easy, however, cost for making such a facility and hiring trainers and ensuring silence is kept from majority of Krogan and public, very costly."

"How costly are we talking?" Tevos asked now, narrowing her eyes.

"Oh, well, depends on how big you want operation. A single planet, privately owned, remote. Does the facility that makes the clone also double as a training center? Educational facility— it would be big." Valern replied easily, but the way his eyes looked, Sparatus and Tevos could tell he was partly excited for the endeavour.

"Supporting the Quarrians in the future endeavour would be taxing enough as was, can we possibly support this facility on the side?"

Sparatus asked, entwining his talons before his face, expression thoughtful.

"Not without a little more help, maybe if we ask the Hanar to make contributions in exchange for the rights to any Prothean technology found on Hanar worlds?" Tevos suggested, they both looked at her in surprise. "What? They've been pushing for that right for almost a decade now, we get our credits, and they get their religious artifacts."

"But the complete technological rights to any Prothean ruins and artifacts found?" Valern asked, dubious. "Tevos, if they come across a cache of information, they could turn us away simply because artifacts of the Enkindlers are not to be disturbed. We could seriously miss some advanced finds trying to get past the red tape there."

"We don't need might_s and maybe_s, Valern," Tevos said, eyes tired. "We need funding, and if this gets us that funding for our own private army of Krogan, loyal to the Citadel Council, those are sure facts. But you're risking them on maybes. Besides, technological is why we're bringing the Quarrians back in, They can provide any technological advances for now, their knowledge on the Geth combined with their natural talents should sate our need for tech for while we build a stronger power base, and the appointed Volus will also provide a nice boost to our economy since they'll attempt to pick up the pace once they become a full member of Citadel Council."

Valern stared at her for a moment, then nodded, subdued by her arguments. "I can see no fault there," he admitted, sitting down back. "Alright, so, to clarify, we're going with the Krogan clone army?"

"Yes," Tevos nodded, Sparatus also agreed.

"Good," Valern smiled slightly. "I've already got a team and planet in mind, I'll forward you files before the end of today, his name is Mordin Solus, brilliant man, up and coming star within the Special Tasks Group."

Sparatus nodded slowly. "When can we begin then?"

"If you want a rush order, we can begin in about a month, once the facility is set up and personnel have been briefed, I'll also assign STG surveillance around the planet, to ward off visitors. As usual, I'll use back channels, discretion and all." Valern promised. "So all that leaves is the Batarians as the only wildcard left on the board. Sides the Terminus systems, which we'll need to bring to heel one of these days."

"Soon enough, Valern," Sparatus said, closing his eyes. "Soon enough."

* * *

><p>Omega Nebula, 2145, 13:00 Cycles. Citadel
Calendar.
Omega Station, club Afterlife. Aria's private chambers.

>Aria T'Loak, Pirate Queen of Omega, it's undisputed and, depending on who you asked and how smart they were, untouchable

master. She had come to the Station with nothing but an attitude, some credits and in such a time built powerful connections, made friends and enemies alike before destroying said enemies if they didn't become her friends. And when her greatest rival, Patriarch challenged her inside the very club she now ruled from, she had crushed him and claimed his throne.

Now Omega was hers, and anyone who was anyone doing anything worth doing had to answer to her, so when she was pressed against the wall, naked from her shower with a sword point pressed to the edge of her throat, the cute little Asari broad she'd pulled out of the club for the night laying in her bed, throat slit and bleeding all over the expensive sheets. She was understandably a little pissed.

"Try your biotics," her assailant hissed from behind its matt black mask, its eyes revealed only by the reflecting black lenses of said mask. The uniform it wore wasn't like anything she'd ever seen, it looked like a hard suit, except it had a more leathery appearance to it, and the only actual armor plating was at the chest, shoulders, knees and elbows. Beyond that, she could see the suit wasn't meant for a straight up fight.

In any other instance, that meant she'd have won, but whoever it was had a sword to the skin of her throat, and the black blade hummed softly. She could spot a tuft of dark hair, and a pale skin, she frowned. It didn't like any species she'd ever seen.

"You're a human," she noted with controlled rage. "Color me disappointed, I'd heard your species were taller."

The human didn't reply, instead he leaned closer, she could feel its eyes never leaving her face. A feat considering that Aria was striking, beautiful and alluring, even by Asari standards, whoever this human was, he was either gay or had the focus of a military man. "I bring an offering from a very important person from the other side of the Iron curtain."

The Iron Curtain, the unofficial designation for the Relay link between the Human space and Council space. A line that had been agreed not to be crossed until more stable relations could be established.

"Kinda breaking your own word, aren't you?" Aria said smoothly, "Coming into Council Space despite the strict no-no to without their approval."

"We're not in Council space, we're in the Terminus systems," The man, she decidedly male, replied just as smoothly. "And the message I bring concerns you, so, I'm going to take my sword away from your throat, you try to kill me, and I guarantee you, I won't stop myself from cutting your head off."

Aria didn't reply, but the look she gave him was enough for him step back, she leaned against the wall, crossing her arms over her impressive bust and tilting her head. "Now give me the message."

The human twirled his sword in his palm before sheathing it at his side, he took three steps back. Normally, this would be the perfect time to strike, but she was curious as to who was contacting her, if it was human, it had better be a good offer.

The man kneeled, surprising her as he placed a circular disk onto the floor. He stood, stepped back and tapped a key on his wrist mounted computer. A pause, then the disk came to life, with a flash of blue and yellow, a man now stood before her, wavering in the form of a holographic interface.

He was smoking a cigar, and upon seeing her state of undress, glanced her over once, then back to her face. "Aria T'loak I presume?" she nodded stiffly, resisting the urge to say something snippy about his obvious once over. "Sorry my agent caught you in such a state of undress."

"Consider it an honor," Aria drawled boredly, eyes narrowing. "Now, what's so important you sent someone across the curtain just to talk to a little old pirate queen?"

The human, short hair, she could spot odd colored streaks across it. And his eyes, they glowed, prosthetics, likely. "An offer of partnership, Ms. T'loak, you've probably heard the whispers of the unrest in Citadel space, correct?"

"Who hasn't?" Aria replied simply. Extranet was abuzz with rumors about this and that, all different opinions saying the Council had surrendered in all but official declaration, others said the Council had a secret weapon, so many things were passed around it was like a disease.

"Well, I have it on good authority that once the Council finishes counting its ducks into a row back home, they'll be turning their gaze onto the Terminus systems for expansion." The man replied, and at the quirk of her brow he added, "Ah, so you have heard. Then you know they'll do it, for the resources, to stand against Humanity and its allies."

"And it will cost them if they try," Aria said, frowning.

Yeah, she had heard about it, hell, she had to give the council props for it actually, the Terminus systems were outside Council space, and for that many criminals, slavers, and others such unwanted variables came to the systems to conduct their business. And since no real species called the Teminus systems home sides the Vorchas, Yahgs and the Valieri, but the last two barely counted because the Yahgs were just now getting their own handle on leaving the ground for in-atmosphere flight and the Valieri were content to sit inside their home system and meditate the very fabric of existence like the giant "wise" lizards they were.

"It will cost them, but they will succeed and in the long run it will be worth it with the resources they'll have acquired from taking the various uninhabited mineral rich worlds the Terminus systems are renowned for, along with the several dozen unclaimed garden worlds." The man returned easily. "You know it, I know it. Question is, how do you plan to stop it?"

"Let me guess," Aria growled, "That's this offer is about, right?"

"Correct," The man smiled, "See, I'm starting a Black Operations group, off the books and out of my own pockets, it's objective? To

ensure Humanity isn't challenged by its fourth most dangerous foe in history."

"Fourth?" Aria raised a brow, now genuinely curious. "You rank the Citadel Council fourth? Who the Goddess is first, second and third?"

"A discussion for another time, Ms. T'loak, the offer at hand," the Man, to her chagrin, dismissed idly. "Just know I intend to ensure that the council can pipe dream of it, but they will never become strong enough to pose any real threat. Which is why I want my Black Operations group to be operating out in Omega, using the station as a Forward Operations Base, it will be the perfect communications point for operations in the Terminus systems."

"And you're telling me all this, why?" the Asari asked now, growing tired of the pointless being around the shrubbery.

"Well, it would be bad decorum if I didn't inform my possible Right hand partner of why I needed her blessing to operate on her station, of course," The human gestured his smoking cigar at her. "I want you as both a commander for the overall group in the Terminus systems, next to me your authority will be absolute."

"And what is this group going to be made of? Humans?" She asked.

"People of your choosing, I've had my left hand here," he turned and gestured to the kneeling human with the sword. "Kai Leng, consider him your personal Assassin and bodyguard."

"I've enough of those," Aria replied.

"Not any like Leng, I assure you. He'll serve you well, you already saw he's quite capable of getting past security measures." The man said, smirking a bit when he saw Aria faintly nod. "He'll also act as our go between until a more stable line of communication can be set up."

Of course, Aria thought. Bringing a ship here would be noticeable, especially with how advanced Human ships were, so just driving over for a chat would gain the council's attention, and she assumed this man didn't want anyone knowing Humanity was involved here. "Alright, so, what is this little group called and how I am going to get people if you're not sending them?"

"You'll recruit mercenaries, criminals and fanatics who hate the council, have them perform hit and runs on Council supplies moving through the Terminus systems from their mining operations."

"Terrorism then?" Aria raised a brow.

"I prefer to think of it as taking from the rich and giving it to the deserving," The man replied, chuckling a bit as Aria's eyes glinted with amusement. "As for the group name, well, since it started as me, you and Kai Leng, let's go with _Cerberus_."

"Cerberus," Aria raised a brow. "The Goddess does that mean?"

"Human Mythology, Cerberus was a three headed dog who guarded the gates of Hades, keeping those who sought to escape in and stopping those who would enter to do it harm." The man paused, "And like Teminus is our Hades, Cerberus will ensure the Council never enters without paying the price."

Aria raised a brow, she'd definitely need to look into Human mythology at some point in her life because it sounded like a whole new can of questions to laugh to herself about. But for now, she decided she liked the arrangement. "Alright. Partner. Now, what do I called you?"

The man smiled, "You can call me the Illusive Man."

"Illusive Man, interesting name, or is it a title?" Aria narrowed her eyes. "If we're partners, I don't deal in titles."

"It's all you'll get for now, Queen of Omega, until I'm sure I can trust you. Afterall, trust is earned, and putting a lot in you as it is." TIM said, taking a drag of his cigar before nodding, "Now, I must be off, play nicely you two. I'll contact you both again in a week."

The image flickered out and died.

Kai Leng rose, walking over to the disk he retrieved it and slid into a compartment on his belt. "I guess we have work to do," he mumbled to her, tone gravely, more subdued than it had been when he had a sword to her throat.

"Yes," Aria nodded slowly, eyeing him. "Seems so."

Things just got more interesting in the Terminus systems.

* * *

><p>End of Chapter Fifteen

_And there it is, to make up for my horrible timing for Chapter 14, here is 15 in all its dramatic, plotting glory! Now, I know a lot of you are all "Screw the council, humanity rules!" but, realistically, with the how the agreement between the UNSC and Council is set up, the Quarrians have no choice but to play ball or risk even bigger consequences! Also TIM being TIM as usual. Also, my council aren't complete morons.
>

17. Chapter Sixteen

**Author's Note: **_Le Gasp! Another update in less than a week!? INORITE?!_

In Infinitum: First Contact

Chapter Sixteen

**January 30, 2582. Military Calendar.
>UNSC Destroyer _**King's Hand**_**, Epsilon Eridani System.
1200 Hours.

>Lieutenant Arthur Kowalski's day had gone from routine to shit storm. And it had done it so fast he literally felt as if one moment he was on his way home to his wife and child after a long flight inside the transport back to Eridanus II for a much needed Leave of Absence. And shortly after he hit the spaceport, he had been pulled aside due to a "red flag" that they had to confirm. Next he had been drugged and since he woke up tied to a chair in a room lit only by a light overhead, a table before him and a reflective one way mirror staring back at him he supposed shit had just gotten real.

It had to be the Insurrectionists, or what was left of them. They must have figured out his identity as a Prowler Captain and captured him for information, no matter, they'd get nothing. All ONI operatives underwent training to resist the tortures of interrogation, name it, he could handle it. He justâ€¦ never hoped he'd ever have to actually put that training to use.

He gulped as he heard the door locks hiss, then it parted from the wall. Kowalski steeled himself to meet his captor and interrogator. Rescue wouldn't be coming, he'd die here or find some way to escape, just bide time and lose no focus on the objective. Remain alive and protect UNSC/ONI secrets.

His breath was knocked from his lungs however when it was non other than Fleet Admiral Leonardo Petrov who stepped into the room, arms behind his back, chest full of medals and dress suit neatly pressed. An odd clinking caught Kowalski's ear and he glanced over to the Admiral's side, instead of a UNSC standard issue sidearm he was carrying at his hip a sheathed sword, long and thin.

"Sir, what's this about?" Kowalski asked, blinking in surprise. It wasn't the Insurrectionists then.

The Admiral pointedly ignored him as he pulled the neat chair out, took a seat and slid forward, elbows atop the table and fingers entwined before his face. His eyes stared at Kowalski, and when the man was about to speak again is when Leonardo chose his moment to talk.

"First Lieutenant Arthur Kowalski, UNSC Office of Naval Intelligence, Prowler Corps. Captain of the Prowler Shadow on Shadows. Enlisted January today in twenty-five seventy-two at age nineteen." Leonardo didn't have a datapad on him, nor an earpiece. "You first trained at New Alexandria, third of your class and graduated with high honors. Given the rank of Corporal and stationed aboard the Destroyer Halcyon Six and saw combat against the insurrectionists nineteen times in two years, earning a purple heart and that nice, prosthetic leg beneath your leggings when an Anti-Armor sheared your leg off. And then, after surgery, you were picked out for a promotion in the Marine corps, but were instead offered an Officer's position inside our very own Office of Naval Intelligence." Leonardo tilted his head. "Which you accepted, promoted to Junior Lieutenant, you took part in at least two dozen confirmed Black Operations for ONI, and probably more they kept off the books and from my eyes."

Leonardo smiled. "And now, you're a full First Lieutenant, commanding your own Prowler and one of ONI's best agents with a spot clean record and friends in places so high I had to wait until you were in very murky water to pull my little snatch-and-grab because you'd have heard I was coming otherwise." He clapped once, twice and then set

his hands down.

Kowalski sat there, listening as the Fleet Admiral laid out his military history down to his enlistment date. Biting his lip, he had to wonder where the Admiral was going with this, the Operation with the _Far Away _was top secret, no records, they'd gone in, done the deed and flew out. He had an alibi, there wasn't any holes. The Fleet Admiral had to be acting on a hunch. Kowalski just needed to play it out and keep to his story.

"Now," Leonardo said, eyes narrowing slightly. "To answer your question. This is about you and your prowler picking up a Pelican carrying ONI elements that sabotaged the _Far Away_, which ended in its destruction via Slipspace drive malfunction." The Fleet Admiral stood, "Now, you're going to give me the names of the operatives involved and who ordered the operation. Am I clear?"

A pause, then Kowalski slid his "shocked" face on. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir—I was running a recon mission in the Centuari Gamma system as per orders from Admiral—"

"Richardson, I know, I've read the report," Leonardo interrupted, frowning down at the man and the gaze was such intensity that Kowalski could swear he almost felt as a physical sensation of being pushed down. "It was very thorough, time logged and all. We even ran the Prowler's engine times and they matched. For all intents of purposes your story checks out and you're completely safe. Except one minor detail that I got to before ONI could correct it."

Leonardo reached behind him, producing a datapad and sliding it onto the table. And on its screen were a series of photos, of his prowler, crew mounting the ship, shot after shot. If Kowalski had to guess they were taken from a hidden camera from one of the hanger crew where the Prowler had been kept. And finally, when the all shots finished running, he paled.

Not one of them had shown him getting aboard the prowler, even him arriving wasn't shown.

Kowalski suddenly felt like he was swimming with a shark and had just been nicked on the leg to draw blood.

Leonardo saw this. "So you caught it too, huh? Funny, reports filed by you said you were definitely there, that you piloted that recon mission," he tapped his chin in mock thought, "But, you weren't even there. You've some skills, Lieutenant. Should teach em to every Captain. Run a mission without even being on it. Color me impressed." The Fleet Admiral chuckled in a way that made Kowalski very uncomfortable.

"Now that we've proven you didn't pilot that mission, lets talk about the mission you did pilot, an operation for ONI to pick up their operatives after they'd sabotaged the Far Away and then get out of dodge and go on with your life like it hadn't happened." Leonardo leaned forward. "Now, give me the names of the operatives and the big shots who ordered the operation."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I was piloting a recon mission in—" Kowalski bit his lip when Leonardo glared, eyes lighting with a restrained fury.

"First Lieutenant, I'll ask nicely one more time. What are the names of the operatives, and who ordered that operation?" Leonardo spoke slowly, very deliberately and with such contained seething in each word Kowalski gulped.

"I already told you, I was running a recon mission as per Admiral Richardson's orders. Sir." Kowalski replied. He had to keep it up, admitting now was a sure fire way to get fired and serve time. He just needed to buy time and hope the brass could get him out.

Leonardo stared long and hard, finally he gave a resigned sigh. "I'm sorry it had to come to this, Lieutenant Kowalski," he brought his datapad back over, and turned it around, tapping one of the keys. When it said connection established, Leonardo said. "Sierra Zero-Five-Eight. Are you in position?" He asked.

Sierraâ€¦ that was Designation given to Spartansâ€¦ and if wasn't followed by a color or Letter, it wasn't a series III or IV. Which meant. "What are you doing, sir?" Kowalski asked, a feeling pulling at his gut.

"_Affirmative, targets in sight_." The subtle sound of an SRS99 bolt being cocked, a click. "_Safety off_." The low, monotone female voice added. "_Awaiting green light for shoot._"

"Copy, Sierra Zero-Five-Seven," Leonardo replied, and added. "Link your Smart Linked scope to this tablet, if you would." he said.

"_Affirmative_."

A moment passed, then the tablets screen flickered to the view of a scope being trained on a woman's head, a very familiar woman. The smiling face, flowing black hair, simple clothing.

"Mariaâ€¦" Kowalski's face lost all color, his voice broke and terror gripped at his heart. "What are you doing?! Don't hurt them!"

"Sierra, if they get to the vehicle then you can't confirm kills, correct?" Leonardo asked, ignoring the now panicking man.

"_Aye, sir_." The Spartan replied.

"Very well, until I say so you're not to fire, but if they reach their vehicle you're to eliminated them." Leonardo said, crossing his arms behind his back.

"_Confirmed_." There wasn't a waver in the ice cool tone.

The scope zoomed further zeroing onto the laughing head of the child, closing slightly. Kowalski watched with dread as the tiny little dot that indicated where the bullet would land was trained on the side of his son's temple.

"Are now aware of the stakes, Lieutenant Kowalski?" Leonardo asked, when Kowalski didn't look away from the tablet, the Fleet Admiral snapped, "Kowalski! Look. At. Me." He growled, and the man's gaze

wavered to him. "You now understand I mean business. So, I'm going to ask again. The name of the operatives and the one who ordered the operation."

"_Please_! My family is innocent in this, they had nothing to do with my job, or ONI!" Kowalski pleaded, looking desperately. "I tell you, they'll me!"

"And you don't, I'll kill your family!" Leonardo brought his palms down onto the table with a slam. Making the Lieutenant jump. "I want their names!"

"I can't!"

"Sierra, target the child first."

"No!" Kowalski cried, watching in horror as the aim that had been drifting towards his wife turned back and "snapped" onto his son's head as he played with some other children in a sandbox like the happy five year old he was.

"_Confirmed. No collateral_." The reticle didn't waver, "_Awaiting green light_."

"Fire on my mark," Leonardo replied with a growl. "Three."

"NO!" Kowalski thrashed in his chair, eyes wild as he tried to get at Leonardo, but it was bolted down and the restraints weren't giving. "You son of a bitch, You can't!"

"Two." Leonardo growled, "Names, Lieutenant!"

"I can't!" Kowalski cried, tears now streaming down his cheeks, anything to get this man's sympathy, to save his family. "Please! Don't hurt them!"

"One," Leonardo whispered, Kowalski's eyes widened. "Sierra, you are green light-"

"Lawson and Taylor!" Kowalski caved with a scream.

Leonardo paused mid sentence. "Go on." he coaxed slowly, eyes glinting with something.

"Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor! They were the operatives who destroyed the Far Away!" Kowalski stared, eyes red as tears leaked down his cheeks. Lip quivering, "They're both with ONI."

"Obviously," Leonardo said, sitting down and frowning. "And who ordered it?"

"I don't know."

"Sierra-"

"I really don't!" Kowalski yelled, eyes wide. "I never got a name, all I know is it was high up in the ONI food chain, but I did overhear Miranda and Jacob talking, she mentioned a single name, Harper! She said Harper!"

Leonardo blinked, Harper there was only one Harper he could recall in the Intelligence division who may have the leeway to pull something like this, Jack Harper. If it was good ol' Jack, then Leonardo needed to act quickly, no doubt that paranoid bastard was aware that Kowalski hadn't reached home yet. Jack Harper, a name I hoped I never would have to tangle with. He thought, frowning.

Seeing the frown, Kowalski said, "I swear it's the truth! That's all I know! Please, let my family go." the Lieutenant begged.

"Sierra, take the shot." Leonardo intoned.

"No!"

"Affirmative." The Spartan said, and the recile zeroed on his sons head, Kowalski watched as his son laughed, eyes happy. Click! A shutter took the view, and it was done. His son continued to play, the "scope" shifted to his wife. Click! "Recon complete. Pulling out to exfil point now."

"Copied, Sierra, good work." Leonardo said, watching Kowalski panted, staring at the tablet with disbelieving eyes. "You mean?"

"They were never in any danger, Lieutenant," Leonardo replied, standing and dusting off his shoulder before retrieving the tablet. "Like you said, they're innocent in this affair" he paused, "Innocent like the crew of the Far Away. You a lot of people of their loved ones, Lieutenant, inadvertently or not, their blood has dripped onto your fingers." he narrowed his eyes.

And then his tone turned cold. "And for that I cannot forgive you, for Falsifying vital information, undermining peace efforts with a foreign government and withholding vital information pertaining to the destruction of UNSC property and the death of its personnel, I, as Fleet Admiral of the United Nations Space Command, sentence you to death."

The door opened, and in marched a soldier holding up a M6H, which Leonardo took as Kowalski stared in shock at the sentence the Fleet Admiral just said. "To be carried out immediately." and with that, Leonardo raised the handgun, took but a moment to level the barrel straight between Kowalski's eyes. He pulled the trigger.

And the man's head flew back, gore decorating the wall and floor behind him.

Leonardo lowered the gun, handing it back to the soldier. "Tell the captain to order full speed back to Atlas, I need to address the Committee." he said, turning away from the mess as he stepped out of the interrogation room. "And have someone clean up that mess."

He strode into the hallways of the ship, people coming and going. Jack Harper.. Of all people, but why? What was the angle? Leonardo frowned. "Guess he's still bitter." he chuckled briefly, shaking his head.

Still, he had to catch his prey quickly, he'd need to secure Miranda

and Jacob first, so they could also point to Harper, one man's vote won't get him, he needed the triggermen's fingers on him too.

He had a lot of work to do, it seemed.

* * *

><p>Widow System, Citadel Station. 12:30
Cycles.
Presidium, Batarian Embassy. Councillor Sparatus.

>The Embassy doors parted for the Turian as he approached, stepping through and into the chambers of the Batarian Ambassador Selke Trowork, representing the Batarian Hegemony for roughly five years now. Sparatus read up a bit, he had a strong position in politics and he was a proud Batarian, seemed it was genetic for their kind, least the ones who were born into power rather than the lower classes. A few red flags here and there by C-Sec, but nothing was proven so he was still Ambassador.

The four eyed alien looked up, blinking in surprise, "Councillor! I'm sorry I didn't prepare for your arrival, I wasn't expecting you." he stood from behind his desk, Sparatus stopped the action with a raise of his hand, the Batarian nodded, sitting back down. "A drink?"

"Perhaps later," Sparatus said, sitting down across from him and getting comfortable. "For now, I need to discuss some things with you concerning future events between our governments." The Turian watched as the Batarian's shoulders hardened and a defensive glint entered its eyes. "I'll be blunt, Ambassador, you need to get in touch with the ruling party and tell them to halt any slaving operations inside Citadel space, along with illegal export and import between the Terminus systems and Council space."

"Those are some heavy accusations, Councillor," Selke said slowly, eyes narrowing ever so slightly and his lips formed a tight line momentarily. "The Hegemony offers no such illegal activities and our slaving operations are a part of cult-"

"Cultural heritage," Sparatus interrupted, "I'm aware and you and I both know it's utter Shatha dung, it's an excuse for you to keep doing it without coming under too heavy scrutiny from the previous councillors, and it has been overlooked because you've been keeping your noses relatively clean and not causing too big an uproar." The Turian narrowed his eyes in turn. "Until now. Now, it will cease such slaver actions inside Citadel space and if I find one more Krogan Kreflak shotgun on the market from the Terminus systems, I'm going to be very displeased."

"You're overstepping your power, _Councillor_." Selke made to stand. And two figures flickered into position behind him at his sides, they planted hands on his shoulders and sat him back down, "Let me go!"

"It's you who oversteps your position, Selke." Sparatus said simply, standing and leaning onto the desk after placing his hands upon it. "I want you to tell your leaders that if my demands aren't met, and that if more slaver operations and black market deals find their way into Council space, then your government will be looking at mountains of lost powers."

"Then we'll just secede from the Council then," Selke growled, defiant. "You think you can threaten us, the Hegemony? Just because-

"Because I am part of the ruling body of Citadel space? Yes, Yes I believe I can." Sparatus frowned, mandibles twitching slightly. "I said stop in Council space, however, I didn't say anything about not going to do business in the Terminus systems, didn't I?"

That stopped Selke, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, should such operations not be conducted against another Council race on council space, or during business in the Terminus systems, I'm sure that whatever scale of the operations can beâ€¦" Sparatus paused, thoughtful. "Overlooked, for the Batarian's outstanding efficiency at stopping the illegal black Market dealers and dangerous slavers at the edges of our system. Why, you'd be heroes to the public, serving as well as the Turians do.' Sparatus sat back down, nodding to the two figures, who stepped back.

Selke licked his lips, torn. Pride demanded he tell the Turian to shove a life grenade down his gizzard, Councillor or no, the more rational part of him however looked at the pros and cons of this arrangement. Pros? Unlimited slavery out in the Terminus systems, where there was no overall law sides what they imposed on themselves, little chance of being seen by Council eyes, if any at all. They could raid colonies, rather than just small settlements or ships.

And the slave trade always ended up back in Terminus anyways, they'd be keeping it in the free zone. Cons of course would be allowing this to stand, the Hegemony would want more, but this wasn't a decision he could make himself, he was only an Ambassador and the ruling party would want to speak to the Councillor himself.

"The Ruling party would need to speak with you themselves about this," Selke said finally, looking up at him. "I can't make this decision myself. Butâ€¦ your offer has intrigued me enough that I will relay it to the ruling party and arrange a meeting. You can meet them on Khar'Shan within two days, concerning the urgency of the offer."

"No, no need to meet, they need only get into contact with me, we can iron out the details then, if you'll allow me, I'll give you a means they can reach me. Once we have the details figured out, I'm sure they'll contact you again, Ambassador,' Sparatus nodded, stood and checked his Omni-Tool. "Ah, my other appointment," he looked back to the Batarian. "Join me on a flight to the council chambers? We'll both be heading there."

"I don't have any-" An alert on his console made the Ambassador glance down, then, seeing it, blinked in surprise. "I suppose I can't turn down that offer, now can I?"

"It would be rude." Sparatus shrugged.

"Alright." Selke stood, brushing off his expensive suit and nodding he was ready. Together, the Councillor and Ambassador moved out into the hall and towards the aircar lot, where one was already

waiting.

They slid into the passenger seat, and the driver and guard sat up front, C-Sex SRT members. The car jerked forward and joined the heavy flow of other vehicles in the busy lanes above the Presidium.

"So what is this meeting about?" Selke asked, helping himself to some of the Amino friendly drinks without asking.

"The Council and I will be inducting the Volus into the Council." Sparatus replied, and he could almost hear the Batarian choke on the drink, it amused the Turian, but his face remained impassive. Even as the four eyed alien was staring at him in disbelief.

"You're serious?" Selke couldn't believe it. "You're giving the Volus a position on the Council? Why not Batarians? Or even the Hanar. But the _Volus_?"

"Because for the future we're going to need their _bottom line_ way of thinking," Sparatus replied easily, getting a drink for himself after a moment, a sip, then he continued. "They own a large of banking agencies across the galaxy, and more than a few of them would be more than willing to part with more money to pick up the slack that the political pressure of being on the Council brings."

"Forcing a drop in financial crimes and boosting productivity as a whole," Selke frowned, nodding in understanding. "But, what are the future plans? You're extending such an offer to the Hegemony and making the Volus a member of the Council." The Batarian paused, then added, "This is about the humans, isn't it?"

"That obvious?" Sparatus sighed, looking out the window. "It is, they are stronger, more advanced and possess a fleet to rival ours, and they don't rely on Eezo, you've heard the whispers. And the only reason we're probably still a council is because they're merciful. Now, we plan to use the time we have to push for more power, a lot more." He glanced back at the Ambassador. "And naturally, that means we need to change things up, the ship has been rocked and now its all hands on deck or go down with it."

"All hands on deck, huh?" The Batarian muttered, taking another a larger shot of the drink now. "This might sour the ruling party's mood, they might demand a council seat for this."

"And they may yet get it," Sparatus replied honestly, rolling his eyes when he glanced away. "But not at the moment, we can't afford to induct two races to the council so close together, it would be an obvious sign of our desperation."

"And bringing the Quarians back into the Council Races wasn't big enough of that sign?" Selke retorted with no small amount of disgust. "Suit rats, the lot of them."

"That may be, but they're useful suit rats. They've tech expertise and knowledge we'll need for the future if we're ever to stand up against the Humans should things turn sour between our two sides." Sparatus explained, shaking his head. He personally didn't care for the Quarians, they weren't bad or good, but they were necessary and that was enough for him to accept them.

"Still, won't the public question it?"

"Yes, but we'll also address that at the meeting after we induct Volus Councillor," The Turian said.

"Mm," Selke hummed, mind swimming with ideas and schemes to further his own political position now that the government back home would be very unstable since the new position of "unlimited" slaving in the Terminus was going to put a few people on overdrive, hopefully enough to ignore a mistake or two with their security measures.

It was time for Selke and his father to have a nice long chat about who inherited what when heâ€¦| tragically passes on. Oh yes. A slow smile made its way onto the Batarian's face. "Hooray to unity, am I right, Councillor?"

"Hooray to Mutually Assured Destruction." Sparatus replied idly, "The council falls, and then it's a bunch of divided species against a superpower with tech beyond our generation."

Together, they raised their glasses and clinked them together.

* * *

><p>Omega Nebula, Omega Station. 13:00 Cycles.
Afterlife, Aria's private chambers.

>Aria watched and listened to the holovids as the Volus representative on the council stepped up, beginning to give an "inspiring" speech to the other races about how the Volus weren't worthy, that they would do their utmost for galactic society with their newly appointed position. It was honestly laughable if Aria wasn't entirely aware of the sheer brilliance of the move the Council had done by giving the Volus their position and what it would mean for them in the long run.

"So that's a Volus," Kai Leng's low, almost constantly ominous voice drawled behind her as the pirate queen turned her head, staring at him with a narrowed eyed glare. She hated when he did that, but she couldn't very well kill him. True to TIM's word he had been a Goddess send.

In the last two days, all three High Value Targets and five lower "choice" ones she'd given him had ended up dead, all of them, within two days! Up and coming crime bosses "vowing" to replace her as king/emperor/grand puba or whatever damnation else they said, dead. Their Lieutenants who she couldn't lure to her side, dead.

And she didn't lose a single flunky, and she owed it all to the dark haired human leaning against the wall behind her chair, arms crossed over his chest. She admitted, she found the air of constant danger, his talents, knowing he was as good as he was. It was alluring and she considered tempting him to bed her, to at least experience something new, since she'd never tried human before.

But, it was clear from her shower encounter the man didn't care for sex appeal, he'd never glance her way, and honestly, it just made her want to try and tempt him further. But there was a time for business and a time for pleasure, now was business time.

"Yeah, that is. Never seen one before?" she asked back, her own voice as bored as it usually was.

"No, just what you've sent me to kill, two Krogan, some Vorchas and a Salarian and Asari. One Turian." Kai tilted his head. "They're short." he noted, watching the stubby creature speak its speech, which he ignored because it honestly didn't interest him.

"They don't tend to get out often, most are bankers or merchants, letting a front man do the work, since they're not exactly a military powerhouse," Aria further explained, having become used to Kai Leng's lack of knowledge concerning council races. "Sorta like yours—| what are they, Unngoy?"

"Yes."

"Right, except where those things serve only as Cannon fodder and cheap labour, Volus are financial kings, their whole government hinges around trading, they were even the ones who helped set up the Citadel's economic system, credits and all that." she shrugged, "And they rely on the other races, mostly Turians, for military spine."

"How interesting," Kai Leng mumbled lowly, staring at the holovids before pushing off the wall and proceeding towards the door.

"Off somewhere?" Aria raised a brow, crossing one leg over the other.

Kai Leng paused at the door, then looked over to her. "I'm going to see to your soldiers training. Training them makes me feel—" he paused, as if searching for the right word. "Nostalgic."

"Right," Aria drawled as the dark haired human disappeared into the doorway, that then slid closed behind him. She stretched out, spine popping loudly and she groaned in pleasure before settling back into the chair to finish watching the little meeting.

When not busy, she often tasked Kai Leng to provide combat lessons to her troops, particularly her Batarian and Turian enforcers, since they had similar physiques to the human. He had quickly taken to watching them train, providing pointers here and there to improve their technique. If the sword was any indication Kai Leng believed in getting up close and personal to his targets and would know a thing or two about close combat itself.

He was also learning from them, she had seen him pay rapt attention to the instructors, he himself was fascinated by Turian Hand-to-Hand techniques, and often challenged the Turian combat instructor, Kyrik, they'd yet to break their one for one tie. Which said something about their skills, because if it wasn't for biotics, Aria wasn't sure who would come out in a straight hand-to-hand fight between her and either.

But, she was also curious about that sword of his, more than anything. He was an enigma, besides knowing he was skilled, his name and he was human. She knew nothing. But that sword? She'd seen it carve up armor as if it were butter, when she asked about it. He'd merely called it by a name.

"_High-Frequency _Kusanagi."

_Kusanagi, who names a sword? _It was beyond her. Even then she understood the blade meant a lot to him, since he cared for it like a child. An extremely sharp child, but the point stayed. What was the thing made to make it so outstandingly sharp?

Her holovids flickered, thenâ€¦ static, finally, it cleared. And there was a shadow cloaked figure standing there, a simple, yellow light behind it, casting further shadow upon its features. Aria frowned, "If this is a joke, I'm not laughing." which meant she couldn't even let him live for making her laugh.

"_Aria T'loak_," the voice was deep, distorted, likely wearing a voice modulator. "_I've some interesting news I'd like to extend to you, as you may find it interesting_."

Aria raised a brow. What? Did peoples unknown just think she could be contacted and she'd listen? Then again, the fact he had her private holofeed was a feat she credited to a few, and she knew, or killed, all of them. So, she replied, "What is it?"

"_What if I told you that the Krogan Warlord Okeer was killed two days ago and he possessed a perfect Krogan clone, along with research data leading up to the clone_?"

Aria's interest was again piqued. "I'd say you have my ear."

"_With both, you'd have the means to create yourself an army of Krogan, solidify your position in the Terminus, and not just Omega_." A pause, "_I am willing to part with this information for a price._"

"That being?" Aria narrowed her eyes.

"_You uplift the Yahg_." The shadowed figure replied, to her surprise.

"Uplift them?" Aria shook her head. "Forget it, they're too violent, their pack mentality would have them at everyone else's throats, not to mention the time it would take to train them in space flight."

"_All doable, T'loak, not now, of course. But when the time comes, that you have your army, you uplift them. I assure you, their intelligence is surprising, it will not be a long learning period_." The figure took another pause. "_Swear to this, and I shall reveal to you the location of the research and clone._"

"Very well," Aria said, finality in her voice. "You give me a Krogan cloning book and I'll give the Yahg a shot at the stars. But the information better be good."

"It always is," The figure chuckled. "It's aboard an STG frigate masking itself as a Terminus systems Asari transport, it's making its way back towards Citadel space, and will be using the following Relays to reach it." the image flickered, showing its projected flight path, she nodded. The figure returned. "You've a five hour window."

"Plenty of time," Aria smirked, "Pleasure doing business."

"_Remember your deal, Aleena. I will, and if you do not fulfill your bargain, I will kill you. And your pet human._" A flicker, and the figure was gone before it could see the shock spread across Aria's face. She stared.

And slowly, her shoulders shook, her head lulling back and she broke into an amused laugh, palming coming to support her chin she said, "And the twists keep comingâ€¦ it's been awhile since I've heard that name." she mumbled to herself, then raised her Omni-Tool. "Kai Leng, gather some men for a space mission, I've just received some critical news."

There was silence, then. "_At once_" the line went dead.

"Pirate Queen Aria and her army of Krogan clones." She mumbled, smirking. "I like it."

* * *

><p>End of chapter sixteen

_**And there's chapter sixteen, everyone! More stuff being built up, plots being hatched, people getting offed and Cold War in the making! Hope you enjoyed! RnR and goodnight! Also, yes... High Frequency blade, A La MGR. (No idea what A La means, i just wanted to use it.)

>_

18. Chapter seventeen

In Infinitum: First Contact

Chapter Seventeen

**Omega Nebula, Unregistered Cruiser. 20:00 Cycles.

>Cruiser _**Maiden's Favor**_**, Kai Leng.

>Kai Leng rolled his shoulders, resulting in the soft pops of his joints that made a pleasant tingle travel along his arms. That done, he raised his wrist mounted Tactical Computer or WristComp as it had come to be called. The ship containing their target would be passing this route soon enough, which was why they were hiding behind a cloud of debris, in this case, a large asteroid which had drifted from Omega's debris field and was now serving as cover from enemy LADAR pings, their engines were also cold, but ready to burn to life.

Aria had been very clear about the objectives of this mission. Kill all personnel aboard the ship, once it was secure they were retrieve a pod containing a clone Krogan and any research data that may be aboard its computer systems. She'd told him it was an STG ship, Special Tasks Group. Salarian Intelligence Soldiers and scouts then, the best of the best of the species' troops.

And so Kai wouldn't underestimate them, but he was also take a certain pleasure in the challenge of facing the best the Salarian's had to offer them. He'd tango'd with ODSTs, Sangheili Spec-Ops and

even Jiralhanae Berserkers during their pacification some five years ago on one of their colonies. He'd faced all comers and survived, no, he triumphed.

He leaned back against the wall as the various mixture of aliens around him readied themselves for the boarding. Batarians and Turians were the majority of people under Aria's employ, he spotted a Vorcha or two, lightly armored, dim witted but their healing rate was nothing short of extraordinary, he'd seen a Vorcha shot in the arm, just hiss and regain the use of the limb after a few moments of rest.

They were also equipped with Flame throwers and "Omni-Claws", Kai Leng had first thought their Omni-Tools were similar to Hard Light technology, and in truth they were. The tech their was similar in principle, and if he were a scientist he'd almost find it fascinating. Then again, he wasn't and so questions weren't in his game plan.

"Human."

Kai lifted his covered eyes up to a Batarian offering him a firearm, a shotgun which he remembered was a pump action styled weapon known as a Krellock, A Batarian design. Kai Leng shook his head and reached down, patting his palm to the handle of his Kusanagi at his hip.

The Batarian blinked it's four eyes. "You'll need more than a sword for those long corridors." he said, a hint of annoyance in his tone.

"I have more than what you see," Kai replied simply, cocking a brow. "I'll be fine."

"Alright, it's your ass human." The Batarian shrugged, and slung the shotgun onto his back where it rested in its folded position. He turned away and moved back to his group, chattering with his Turian and fellow Batarian.

For obvious reasons, there were no Krogan's involved in this operation, since a Krogan Clone could possibly complicate things between itself and any Krogan, a couple of Asari looked over at Leng, and whispered in hushed tones. He had become used to this sort of thing, since he was the only Human on Omega, or in the Terminus systems really, he had become a hot topic among curious aliens.

Asari in general, Maiden Stage Asari, to Aria's information, were curious, thirsty for knowledge and experience. And when something new like him came along, they couldn't resist making passes at him, least, he assumed they were passes, he wasn't aware of Asari culture nor societal etiquette so he could only assume.

It was honestly tiring.

"Leng," Kyrik drew Kai's attention from his thoughts. "So what's the big plan?"

"You and Vrok will take two teams, Kyrik, I'm expecting you to take the bridge, Vrok will handle the reactor chambers, can't risk them

possibly trying to overload the core and taking the ship out, nor can we risk communications getting out. So we'll need to jam them at full strength." Leng explained.

"That will prevent us from communicating either, even inside the ship." The Turian pointed out, crossing his arms over his lightweight armor, red and blue in color. "How are we supposed to communicate?"

"If the ship explodes, we'll assume the Core team failed, if we can start talking to each other, jamming was countered. Easy answers," Kai shrugged, tilting his head. "As for me, I'll be making my way for the engines themselves. Killing as I go, once the ship is secure, we get the files and the clone. Then we destroy it."

"Simple, full of holes and could go wrong in any number of ways," The Turian muttered, mandibles twitching slightly. "I like it."

"I thought you might." Kai Leng felt the ship rumble around them and he looked upwards. "It's starting." he mumbled, and rolled his neck before standing from the wall as another rumble, which he knew was the ships main gun firing, shook the ship. "Alright! Safeties off, we're dealing with Salarian Special Tasks Group operatives! Anyone mistakes you make against them will be your last."

"Kyric, Vrok! Gather your teams! Now, all I care about is the data and the tube, if you all have the urge to loot the ship for goods, do it after we finish cleaning it out." Kai Leng proceeded through the crowd as they stood to the sides, proceeding to the airlock, two more rumbles and he paused. "And if we fail, then make no mistake. Aria will still find a way to make us pay."

A few of the others chuckled, but some even agreed. The intercom system barked, "_Enemy ship is disabled! Going in to dock now, but be careful they might have more tricks up their sleeves_." a few moments, then a smaller shudder. "_Airlock is locked. Good luck in there! And Tarik, I swear if you die before you pay me back those credits I'll feed your corpse to the Vorcha_!"

A Batarian grumbled and the others laughed at his expense before the airlock Kai Leng raised a hand for silence. "Form up on the door, they'll be waiting for us since this airlock is a bottle neck." He reached down, gripping the handle of _Kusanagi_.

He pressed the airlock control, it slid open and the enemy ships airlock appeared, still close and locked. He walked forward, three men on each side of the small pathway following after him as he sauntered down the middle, he stopped at the door. Tapped the control. _BRRR! _Locked confirmed. He glanced behind him, "Step back."

The men did as he said, and when they did Kai turned back to the door and he raised a brow. "Let's dance." He mumbled, he gripped the handle of his sword and with a blur of movement his arm cut across the air, metal screeched and with a sharp turn he brought back down in an opposite downwards slash. He twisted the blade mid swing and brought it into a reverse grip and cut across the door once more.

He raised his open palm, which hummed softly with power as he placed it to the door. He frowned, and from his palm fired a jet of red

energy, blasting the cut up doors inward in large melted pieces. "Fire!" He barked, ducking low and keeping the palm raised, it switched colors and put up a Hard-Light shield before him as the others behind him opened fire in time with the seven STG Salarians waiting for them in the docking bay itself.

Kai rushed forward into the bay, palm up and shield raised. He glanced around, taking in their positions before he curled his legs and jumped, and he jumped, clearing a good fifteen feet to get atop some loading crates, two Salarians tracked him. He leaned forward and broke into a sprint, mag boots adhering to the surface to allow for maximum grip for no wasted slipping of his boot.

He was a near black streak of black as he rushed over the crates and jumped across them, a Salarian looked up, turned his Assault rifle mid way before Kai dropped beside him and spun, blade slicing through the air and across the Salarian's face before taking off in another sprint. As he moved away, the Salarian's head split in half at an angle, its body crumbling to the floor.

Kai felt his heart pumping like a war drum as he let the thrill of combat take him over. He focused on two Salarians, the pair who had shot at him originally, the others continued to suppress the doorway to keep his men was from coming onto the ship.

The pair left their cover and one raised its Omni-Tool, and fired a swirling ball of flame. The human frowned and brought his palm up, and with a flash of red fired off a blast, which tore the incinerate apart and hit the Salarian square in the chest, burning through his armor, blackening his flesh and knocking him back five feet with mouth open in mute shock.

The second began to step back as Leng jumped to the side, flipped into a slide and then hopped up into the air to dodge the various shots. And when he reached the air, the Salarian's rifle hissed, overheated. He frowned and tossed it at the Human before his Omni-Tool produced a curved Omni-Blade.

Kai slashed the rifle in two and brought his palm, firing off another laser shot. The Salarian ducked with honed reflexes and rushed forward to meet the bladesman. Kai raised his sword and brought it down, the Salarian leaned to the side, letting it glide over his form, missing before he thrust his own blade forward for Kai's neck.

The man ducked under it, raising his free elbow and slamming it into the Salarian's gut, doubling him over before he spun and delivered a kick to its shoulder, sending the alien back against the floor, it slid and then kicked itself into a back flip that righted itself and raised a handgun, firing as it advanced.

Leng leaned out of the way, then hopped to the side to take cover behind a pillar and he frowned. This Salarian was determined. He turned and saw another raise a larger weapon at the doorway, he raised his palm and fired a single laser shot. The Salarian took the shot to the face, it's shields not registering the round since it was an energy blast and not a slug. The body fell over, along with the weapon.

He then ducked and avoided a beheading from the other Salarian, he

spun around and brought his sword up and through the alien's gut, who gaped in pain, staring into Kai Leng's visor eyes. "That's enough out of you." the human said, and placed his palm to the its head. He fired.

The body fell over and he slid off his sword, turning over he fired a few rounds at the remaining Salarians, driving them into cover and allowing his men to storm into the hanger bay, spreading out with their weapons, from rifles to shotguns, firing. Keeping the Salarians pinned.

"I'm heading deeper into the ship!" Kai shouted above the gunfire to Vrok and Kyrik. "Follow the plan!" He turned and walked towards one of the doors, it parted for him and he proceeded into the hallway as the sounds of weapons fire echoed behind him.

Kai proceeded along. Glancing to and fro with his sword in hand, palming partly raised for either offensive or defensive measures. Another door greeted him and he tapped the controls, locked. He stepped back, gripped his sword.

Slice! Slash! Screeeeeeech.

The door fell to a series of pieces as he blasted it down, raising a shield right after to catch the incoming weapons fire from the two Salarians firing at him from the end of the room, a mess hall from the looks of it. He frowned, his VISR mode activated and he saw two wavering shapes beside the doorway, cloaked enemies.

He smirked, and stepped forward and as he was about to give them their clear shotsâ€¦ he flourished his blade, it swung to, then fro and with a spinning duck he rose again, palm up and shield snapping into place in time with the pair of bodies falling over, their cloaks failing.

Those two dead he could focus on the other flies now retreating from the room, their ambush having failed. He rushed forward, firing laser shots at their retreating forms before they shut the door. He frowned, and reared his palm back, growling as heat gathered in his palm as it glowed red, swirling arcs of power focusing into a single red orb hovering an inch over the circular magnetic coil.

He brought it forward, slamming the orb into the wall, it heated and then exploded outwards, showering the other side with heated debris and shards of metal. A nice, Leng sized hole in the wall he jumped through, glancing down both ways. Nothing.

Beepâ€¦ Beepâ€¦ BEEP!

He looked above, and saw two tech mines. He crouched and brought his palm up, the explosion rumbled him down to his bones as the shield repelled the heat and shrapnel, but the force pushed down him, making him grunt in exertion. As quickly as it started, it was over and he stood. Now, he was mad.

And when Kai Leng got mad, people died.

The man stood, dusting himself and glaring at one end of the hall, then to the next. A moment, then he flickered from view as his camouflage activated and he pressed against the scorched wall. He

waited, silent and unmoving.

There. From around the right corner a figure appeared, then another and then a third. Their weapons raised and they observed the scorch marks along the floor, seeing the outline, they frowned and glanced upwards down the other end of the hall. "Headed that way, mostly likely. Doesn't appeared injured." The Salarian at the point of the group muttered.

The others didn't comment as they kept their heavy pistols pointed down the end of the hall, occasionally glanced at the sizable hole made beside the door.

"Impossible, he was right there in the blast zone." Another muttered,

"No blood, and the outline suggests he didn't drag himself."

The leader paused. Leng watched its large eyes dart side to side, and they rested on his face where they stayed in silence, finally the Salarian opened its mouth to warn his comrades.

That was when Leng sprang from the wall, slamming his palm into the side of ones head and firing a shot right into its skull, his hand came up with his sword and cut across the leader's throat, who gurgled and fell over to bleed out while the final Salarian stepped back, weapon half raised when the human lashed out, gripped its skinny neck and jammed the blade upwards into his chest, the tip jutting out the upper right of its back.

He watched the light fade from its eyes before the dropped. Sliding off his sword on the way down, he swiped the blood off onto the wall and stepped over them, muttering. "Excuse me."

He proceeded down the hall. They'd come from the right, so he assumed there were further positions for possible ambushes along it. Military doctrine dictated they keep falling back until the reached an easy-to-setup area to form a kill zone. So there was likely a more fortified position up ahead that those Salarians had been trying to buy time for.

And he arrived at a set of double doors. Locked and above it read in Salarian "_Authorized Personnel _Only". Kai stared a moment before looking at the door.

He raised a palm and ran it along the silver-white surface. He stepped back and rolled his neck, once he was seven paces away he narrowed his eyes and tightened his hold on his sword. He flexed his free hand's fingers and inhaled. _Time to see if the implants and tech were worth the fortune they cost. _He thought to himself.

He concentrated and the nodes across his body shifted, a soft glow of silver-blue enveloped his form. He saw the edges of his vision blue and crackle with power at the same time he felt power coursing through him. Muscles twitched and he resisted the urge to shudder. He broke forward into a sprint, and when he was two steps from the doors he jumped forward.

And the world blurred for all of a blink. One moment he was facing the door and the next he was on the other side, landing in a

crouch as the five Salarians who had been in position to react stared in surprise for a split second. Too long since Leng jumped into action, he jumped sideways. Flickering from view again to reappear a few feet in the same direction feet first.

He jumped forward now. Teeth grit at the odd feeling of using such an ability repeatedly, still, the Illusive Man wanted "real world" tests outside of a lab and this was as real as it was getting. Leng disappeared again.

He appeared before one of the Salarians, grabbing its rifle and punching it in the face before kicking off its stomach and into the air, they tracked him and fired. He disappeared again. Reappearing on the floor with his palm raised. He fired once, then rolled to the side as the one he fired at was scored in the chest, armor melted and smoking while the wearer writhed in agony.

The shots meant for him pinged the floor as he rolled. He got to a knee and jumped forward again. This time he disappeared and the Salarians glanced around, expecting him to appear at a new angle— instead he simply appeared a foot ahead of his original position. He rushed ahead, one caught him and fired its large handgun.

He raised his palm and the shield snapped into place, taking the rounds easily before he moved forwards and dropped the shield with a spin, dodging one bout of gunfire while sliding his blade along the side of the Salarian's neck, the spin taking him from the front, along the side and behind said alien.

It's partner raised its larger scattershot weapon and fired point blank. Leng grit his teeth as the slugs caught his gut, the ballistic gel and reactive circuits strained, the CNT fibers split, and he flew back, skidding across the floor back first. His palm raised and the shield did as well on instinct, covering himself as he tried to reel in the pain in his gut.

Salarian's were faster than the average human, afterall.

He coughed and tasted copper a moment before he got to his knee, keeping the shield between himself and the enemy he narrowed his eyes. Two broke their firing and moved back into cover, likely to reload, the others continued— and there was a break in their fire when they took moved back into cover.

He disappeared from view. And reappeared beside the two first to reload, they looked up and he cut across them and the wall they'd been hiding behind before he jumped backwards to avoid the retaliation fire. He grit his teeth as a round caught his side, this one didn't hurt nearly as much, but it still stung. He slipped behind a crate, glancing around at the wide open room that appeared to be a storage area.

He growled, his stomach hurt. He glanced down and saw crimson leaking through some holes in his suit. He groaned softly, they'd been deeper than he thought. A breath, then he rolled out of his cover and fired several blasts at the Salarians, forcing them into cover before he jumped forward into a sprint.

Hearing his footfalls coming, they both left their cover in opposite directions and brought their weapons to bear. The left was greeted to

the sight of Leng's palm before it slammed into his face, bringing them both down to the floor and out of sight of the remaining.

A single shot. Then the second turned the corner and opened fire with its assault rifle. Nothing sides the body of his comrade with a scorched hole in his face.

Shick!

The Salarian coughed, glanced down to see the point of a sword poking out its chest through its armor. He turned his head and glared at the human at the corner of its eye. He opened his mouth to curse himâ€| only to gasp in pain when the human jerked its blade upwards, slicing flesh and then jerking the blade out.

The Salarian was dead before he hit the floor.

Kai took another breath and felt his gut curl in pain. He fought back a snarl and focused. Mission first, pain later. He proceeded along the center of the storage area, glancing around to make sure he didn't miss his package as he went along. It was when he came to the end of the room and another set of doors did he stop.

He gripped his sword and slashed across it, then again and once more before blasting it open and stepping into the brightly lit room.

And there was a Turian sitting atop the glass tube, arms crossed and armor lighting up with various lights. It's crimson and blue paint covered face looked up at Leng and its eyes narrowed.

"A human? Here in the Terminus?" It stood now, raising a large, blackened handgun and pointed it at Leng. It eyed Leng's gut, seeing the injury and then its eyes glowed with a hint of relief. "I'll offer you one chance to surrender. I suggest you-"

Leng disappeared, and a blink later, reappeared before the Turian and his blade sang out across the air once, twice and a third time before Leng spun, falling to a knee with the blade extended out in an arc. Splattering a streak of blue blood droplets across the floor in the process.

The Turian promptly fell over dead. It's head rolling from its shoulders, along with a ring that was its raised neck guard. It's stomach had been sliced opened and its chest split open.

"Not in the mood," Leng said and stood, then winced at the flare in his gut. He turned and stepped over the Turian's remains, staring down at the Krogan in the tube. His vision danced and he fell over the tube onto his gut, growling in pain as he broke into a violent coughing fit.

Seconds ticked by and he finally calmed down, growling as crimson stained the glass below him. Mixed with spittle. He wiped his mouth with his forearm and stood, looking down at the Krogan.

Only it wasn't a Krogan. It was empty.

"A decoy?" Leng growled, fury swirling inside him at the thought of having gone through all this for absolutely nothing. He growled and then his com crackled to life, soon Vrok's voice rang

through.

"_Leng! We've got a situation, sides a few Salarians, we've got nothing on the reactor_!" The Batarian reported, sounding angered. Leng could understand. "_I smell a Pyjak_."

Before Leng could agree Kyrik's voice came over the line as well. "_Bridge is empty, the ship's on autopilot and undermanned. I think we've been decoyed_."

Leng grit his teeth. "Was it that obvious?" He didn't wait for a reply before snapping. "Fall back to the ship! This mission is over." he closed the line and glared down at the empty tube before slamming his fist onto the glass, cracking it. That show of frustration done, he stood and turned then marched out of the room back the way he'd come.

When he learned who had planned this he was going to gut them slowly and painfully. _He. Would. _Gut_. Them_.

* * *

><p>Widow System, STG Shuttle. 2145, 20:20 Cycles.
En route to Citadel, Shuttle "**_**Sliver**_**". Captain Kirrahe.

>Kirrahe watched the events unfold aboard the cruiser that would have been carrying the Krogan clone had it not been for a feeling in the back of his mind telling him that maybe that wasn't wise. And that was why he had the cruiser launch without most of its crew sides a few volunteers to ensure the ship kept going and made it back to Citadel space in case his fears were unfounded. And when the boarding began he and the shuttle he'd launched with were already entering the relay towards the Widow system. His men would lay low for now and find individual transport back to Council space in the following week or so as to avoid detection.

And he would be sure to mourn the losses of those who stayed with the ship and ended giving up their lives. Even the Turian spectre who he'd seen sliced up. But what amazed Kirrahe was the technology displayed by the human. Particularly its ability to teleport and it's sword. The teleportationâ€¦ he couldn't begin to fathom how it worked and the sword carved metal and armor like paper.

The humans were truly advanced and ruthless.

He'd have to report this footage along with a few of his personnel notes to the council when he arrived with the clone. But for now, he closed his Omni-Tool and leaned his back against the seat of the shuttle while closing his eyes. He needed a rest as his mind spun the implications of such technology in the hands of such a species.

And there was one running around in the Terminus stems. This would shake some politicians to be sure, and if intel was right, Aria T'loak was involved as well since those were her hired muscle. Least the ones he could identify from the footage.

So, Aria T'loak had a human helping her? Was he military? Ex-Military? Those further complications could only add to the already dicey equation that was shaping up to be a bad mixture for something volatile. If the human was Military, was he acting on

orders as part of a larger human plan? Or was this random and while technically he didn't cross the curtain from Human space to Council Space it was still unnerving to know that humans might come to the Terminus systems as they pleased.

Especially considering what the council intended of said systems.

"_ETA to the Citadel is seven hours, Captain_." The pilot of the shuttle relayed to him through the com.

"Thank you," Kirrahe replied curtly, still focused on his swirling thoughts. No matter the answer, he could already tell that very important events were going to occur in the coming future and a lot would start in the Terminus systems.

"Just perfect." He mumbled, raising a hand to massage his temples when he felt a headache mounting.

* * *

><p>End of chapter seventeen

_**There it is, folks. Chapter Seventeen of In Infinitum: First Contact! Now that you've read, you can kindly review! PS. To those who comment on my writing, I know. It's horrible! But considering the speed of those chapters posted. I like to think it's a tad justified. Also, started playing ME3 multiplayer again, and rolling N7 Slayer, which gave me more than a few ideas for Kai Leng's abilities, of those will be explained later, I assure you all.

>_

**That said, if anyone wants to read through them and replace/revise them for me. (As I'm disgustingly lazy and never do it myself unless paid to). I would offer you one net cookie! Now, have a nice day/night!**

19. Chapter eighteen

In Infinitum: First Contact

Chapter Eighteen

**February 3, 2582. Military Calendar.

>UNSC Colony _**Shanxi**_**, Prometheus System. 1200 Hours.

>Say what you will about inter-species construction projects and colonies, even as "pro-human" as Jack Harper was he could still appreciate the overall appearance of the capital city of Shanxi, it's skyscrapers held the practical designs of most human engineers but you could still obviously spot the Sangheili influence of certain buildings, their rounded edges, outcroppings with just a tad more flair than necessary to point out their importance and the odd shade of blue or green in the windows lining the building. Some were even tipped by honeycombed domes, likely for garden reproduction of both human and Sangheili society.

Jack himself, as a guilty pleasure, enjoyed strolling through

Sangheili influenced gardens. There was just something so regal about their construction and setting that made them a bit more enjoyable than most ones designed by human gardeners. Hell, he even had a Sangheili garden built into the design of his penthouse on the planet. It wasn't honeycombed, but it did have a wide viewing window and panels to allow the natural sunlight in and give him a view from the city from his thirty-eight storey perch atop one of the higher class housing complexes.

Many would ask why he, a powerful backer for a pair of company's who specialised in terraforming and mining was living in a penthouse rather a huge mansion on some privately owned island on Earth or a similar garden world. And honestly, Jack had for a good five years, he lived in what was Miami on Earth for awhile, but after awhile it got stale owning a private manor, servants and all. Guess he just didn't like the overly lavish lifestyle.

So, here he was, sitting in a half circular couch, reclined back into the padding wearing a casual crimson bathrobe with his hair still drying from his morning shower with a glass of wine in hand and a lit Cuban cigar sitting between two fingers of his other hand. And his time passing activity of the day? Just sitting and staring out across the city. Watching vehicles move across the streets below, air shuttles moving across the skies along with police issue Hornet craft floating around the clear blue sky of the colony.

He brought the cigar to his lips, inhaled deeply and then released the puff of smoke in a slow exhale, eyes taking in the sights with the gaze of an admirer to a painting. And then, with but a beeping from his personnel console across the room his gaze was broken and a frown graced his previously impassive lips.

"Answer," he called out clearly.

"Of course, sir." The voice of his personnel Dumb AI rang out gently and politely.

A ping.

"Harper, pick up the damn com line yourself. It's important."

Jack sighed. "When isn't it important with ONI?" he grunted and stood, rolling his neck and being rewarded with a few pops for his trouble. Satisfied, he moved over to the console and looked up. "Alfred, power down." he ordered, it wasn't entirely necessary since Alfred couldn't, by design, betray him, but Jack didn't get to his position without being cautious.

"At once, sir." the AI replied, and a soft thrum died out over the speakers.

That done, Harper tapped the answer key and stood as a circular object in the floor glowed blue, then it warmed to a white and he moved forward into the circle. It rose upwards, scanning him as it went. And when the scanner passed his eyes he was in a different room. In the center of it was a table with three seats, two of which were occupied by his other two colleagues. Vanessa and Albert, both glowing a soft hint of white at their outlines, showing their holographic nature.

He took a seat, knowing it was formed of Hard light tech used for war games in the UNSC's training facilities. He rolled his neck, and sat forward, elbows on the table. "Now, what's so important you called me at home?" he asked.

"You messed up." Vanessa stated bluntly, crossing her arms over her chest at seeing his state of undress.

Jack arched a brow. "Beg your pardon?"

"Leonardo," Albert said now, closing his eyes and taking a breath. "He's onto your agents, Lawson and Taylor."

Jack's brow lowered and his eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Is that a fact?" he asked lowly, tone turning thoughtful.

Vanessa nodded. "It is, how do you plan to handle this?"

"Me?" Jack tilted his head, sitting back and observing both his comrades. "We all agreed to the operation. I even sent my best agents to handle the dirty work." He raised the cigar to his lips, inhale, exhale. He levelled his gaze on Vanessa. "I'm guessing it was your pilot who snapped, right?"

Vanessa narrowed her eyes. Harper smirked. "Bingo." he said, only ever so slightly smug in the small victory. "Now, back onto the topic at hand. If he is after me, he might make the connections to you, so if you plan to throw me to the proverbial wolves, you could at least give me what you got." he said.

"Lawson and Taylor are directly linked to you, if they catch you, however. Me and Albert will be perfectly cleared of any backlash from you, so your threat isn't too worrisome." Vanessa stated, cocking a brow. "So we don't have to lift a finger. Since this is going to be your problem since you and Leonardo have history as is."

"Maybe," Jack conceded with a nod to her point. "But for all your preparations, I know Leonardo, once he catches a scent, he won't leave it be. He catches me, he'll wonder how I got such a grip inside ONI, he'll look for the lines and no matter how good you are at hiding your tracks. Sides shooting yourselves in the head on some backwater world, he'll find you both."

"We'll have alibis."

Jack's lips twitched into a sardonic smile. "Like your pilot had one?"

"Don't push it, Harper." Vanessa grunted. "You're just a piggy bank, we can find others to replace you."

"Enough, both of you." Albert interrupted their little spat. Cool as ever both settled back into more comfortable positions while their eldest comrade spoke, "Her question stands, how do you plan to throw Leonardo off your trail?"

"I've a few ideas already," Jack admitted, taking a sip of his wine. "First thing first, I'll need to make sure Lawson and Taylor don't get caught."

"Quickest way would be to just _remove_ them from the equation entirely," Vanessa said, tone cold. "Quietly."

Jack shook his head. "They're an effective team and Lawson is an exceptional asset, I'd prefer not waste her so callously, no. I think I'll send them on a personnel project of mine," he'd never really told his comrades about his exploits out past the Iron Curtain. No need for them to know now. "They'll be out of the way and well out of Leonardo's reach."

"Personnel project?" Vanessa frowned suspiciously.

"Recon, essentially. Out in Council space, prowler work." Jack replied evenly. Not entirely a lie, just not correcting her as it being the Terminus Systems, nor the recon work also being gaining influence among the Terminus' central "government" on Omega. "They'll be out there for a few months, should give them a good amount of time to see the sights and for Leonardo's trails to get cold."

"_Should_ being the keyword here," Albert countered. "I have to agree with Vanessa, it would be easier to just remove them. Effective they may be, their capture would be too big a hindrance to you, and in turn, us as a whole." the old man said, despite Vanessa's discontent glare.

"I'll take that under advisement, Albert." Jack responded cool as a cucumber with so much doubt being pressed on his own abilities to remain anonymous. "But, they're my operatives and I'll see to their methods myself." he said with a soft finality as he took another puff of his cigar while eyeing the two before him. "Now, if there's nothing else, I believe I have a goose chase to planâ€|?"

"Very well, Jack." Albert relented, closing his eyes. "There's nothing more. I bid you both adieu."

"Don't mess up this time." Vanessa said just before their two images faded away and the scanner dropped down back onto the floor while Jack stood, the chair and room around him faded away back to his apartment.

The scanner clicked and panelling slid back over it to hide it from common eyes. Jack inhaled slowly, whispering. "Idiots."

With a sudden violence he turned on his heel and chucked his quarter full glass of wine across the room where it smashed against the wall, scattering crimson and glass shards across the surrounding floor. He glared at the spot on the wall before he sighed and collected himself. "Alfred, power on."

A moment, then a soft thrum came from the speakers. "Power restored sir, do you need anything of me?" The polite AI asked.

"Yes," Jack said, smoothing his hair back and adjusting his slightly loosened robe. "Some music, I'm thinking something oldâ€| track four of file eight in the classics." He said as he made his way over to the mess he'd made.

"Good choice, sir." Alfred spoke, and then faded out as a slow beating began to thump through the overhead speakers.

_I wear my sunglasses at night~ _

So I can, so I can~

Jack smiled faintly. "Thank you." he began to clean the mess.

Moments later he was tossing the shards away and putting the used cloth in the sink. Servants could do the work, but he was in his own home. Why be lazy? He moved over to his console, head idly bobbing to the music overhead as it played. He sat down and his fingers went to work over the keys.

He tapped into the secure tight beam connection into the local UNSC network. Travelling the back channels, soon he was inside the ONI-official channels and with a soft ping he transmitted a signal on a select frequency of his own creation for use among his operatives across the network.

He got three dozen return pings. A good half of his agents were ready to receive new orders. He checked the returned ping IDs to single out the ones he wanted to send the orders to. Once that was done, he sent out a "stand by" ping to the ones he wanted. Not bothering with the others since after a five second delay they would know they were free to continue and mark it off as a "check up".

He entered a few more keys. Codewording his desired operatives to be on stand-by for the coming days. If things went badly against Leonardo he needed to be ready to break for the Terminus systems, a place even Leonardo, in his direct nature, would need to be careful about entering since he liked to make friends with the Citadel races. He'd be sure to inform Leng and Aria beforehand.

He'd also need a few choice operatives on stand-by to cover his tracks should Vanessa and Albert possibly turn on him. A very real fact considering they were both cold hearted military types who evidently didn't believe in conserving personnel resources even if said resources were one of the most effective they had. But it may just be that Jack and Miranda knew each other on a personnel basis, and by extension, Jacob.

Nonetheless, he didn't appreciate their questioning of his methods on how to deal with his own operatives. Orders coded and sent the company owner closed the network and sent a message to Miranda asking her status. A pause and she replied she and Jacob were good.

He turned to his console and activated the comlink. "Miranda," he greeted. "Jacob."

"_Harper_" Miranda's accented voice came through. "_Is there something you needed_?"

"Yes," Harper replied as he leaned forward, entwining his fingers before his face. "I need you and Jacob on a recon mission outside the Iron Curtain. It seems Leonardo has caught your scent from the _Far Away_ operation,"

"_Damn it_" Miranda cursed so softly the com barely caught it. "_Guess that explains the feeling Jacob has been having_" A sigh. "_Will you be arranging transport_?"

"A single stealth craft, it will get you to the Terminus Systems, from there you'll go to Omega and link up with operative Leng." Harper heard a brief grunt of dissatisfaction from his number two operative. "You disapprove, Lawson?"

"_No sir_," she lied. "_I just had something in my throat_" a distant snicker. "_Oh forâ€¦shut up, Jacob_."

"Regardless, you will be working with Leng out in the Terminus systems, they'll be expecting you." Harper went on, nonplussed by the brief inappropriate exchange.

"_Sir, they'll? Who else is operating out in the Terminus?_"

"Leng is alone, but he's also working with an Asari by the name of Aria T'loak," Jack explained easily as he tilted his head to the side. "I'll send her dossier and more details once you're on the stealth craft. Where are you now?"

"_Eridanus, safe house seven-B_."

"The craft will be waiting for you in the usual place then," Harper said and cut the com.

Jack leaned back with a soft sigh. Hopefully they got out of there without Leonardo being able to track them, if so then he wouldn't have to worry about the zealous Fleet Admiral knocking on his door for awhile. Leonardo would want the two operatives to point him out as well, or at least captured could attempt to link them all together. Before the committee and a carefully selected judge.

That was the problem with Leonardo that Jack was more than willing to exploit. The man had strict morals and abided by them, most of the time that was a good thing. It made him trust worthy if not unpredictable to the more rigid personalities in the military. But his tactical genius and charisma often got him out of such little blocks.

And that was exactly why Jack wasn't going to take chances against his old friend.

Though, the irony of the situation wasn't lost on Jack. It was because of his own support that Leonardo had reached such heights so fast and it would be the old rivalry they'd bred for it as the years went on that would be the fuel for this. Jack closed his eyes and felt a smirk tugging at his lips. "Sometimes I feel like I'm too old for this shit."

"Perhaps a stroll through the garden is in order, sir?" Alfred suggested over the music.

"Sounds like a plan." Jack agreed as he stood. For now he'd counter Leonardo's options, force him to back off. Jack didn't get this far in life and amass so much just to be taken down by a man who didn't understand that where good reigns evil operates in the shadows to keep that good afloat.

Leonardo may not appreciate ONI or its affiliates. But it wasn't any small part for ONI to have helped humanity. And Jack would be sure to

remind the Fleet Admiral of that fact.

* * *

><p>Citadel Station, Council Chambers. 20:00
Cycles.
**Sparatus, Valern, Tevos and new member to the Council, Korlak, sat within the private council chambers looking over the newly received intelligence that the STG team coming out of the Terminus systems after securing the Krogan clone and the genetics research done by the now deceased Krogan warlord and scientist Okeer. And what they saw in an attached sub-file by the STG Captain, Kirahhe. Disturbed them since they all sat in silence as they read.

Finally, it was Sparatus who broke the silence. "Well, this could prove troublesome." he said bluntly, tone bland with an underlying hint of weariness.

"I agree." Tevos muttered.

"As," a raspy inhale. "Do I." said Councillor Korlak of the Volus. "How doâ€we proceed?"

"I want to say capturing this human and resorting to interrogation," Valern spoke up without looking from his Omni-Tool. "But considering the human's place of operation and present company during attack." Being the Terminus systems and Aria's muscle. "Could prove most difficult."

Omega and Aria had always been a thorn in the council's side that they couldn't lawfully touch, nor unlawfully. They'd sent two spectres and a half dozen assassins after Aria, and all had turned up dead or just stopped reporting in altogether only be to found dead or on her payroll. She had half the Terminus systems at her call and the other half gave her a wide berth.

She was queen and knew it.

So what was a human doing working with her? The Terminus Systems were technically outside Council control and to their knowledge Humanity and its allies had obeyed the standing truce agreements that no ship may enter either territory without the clearance of either foreign government. A human in the Terminus wouldn't be a outright breach, but it would be an obvious use of a loophole that since the area was outside their influence then they could come and go as they pleased.

What made the situation worse was that they couldn't outright confront the UNSC about it. Sure, the council could raise a fuss to the leadership but in the end the UNSC held the deck and dealt the hands. Tevos liked to believe that Leonardo was as honourable a man as he seemed to be, but without adequate knowledge of Humanity she couldn't afford to rule out this was some covert operation of some kind.

"I can hear the thoughts swirling around in that head of yours, Tevos." Sparatus commented dryly from his seat, arching a brow plate. "What are you thinking?"

The Asari sighed and set her Omni-Tool down, frowning as she chose

her next words. "I'm doubting this was the work of the UNSC. But at the same time, I'm not ruling it out." she explained, realizing her contradicting statements she added. "Something about this feels off to me. A single human working with pirates, with Aria. What for?" she asked as she looked over her collected councillors.

Valern hummed in thoughtful agreement. "A single well equipped human. By reports and footage, has a sword that can cut through sealed doorways and can teleport. Doesn't appear to be using shielding however." he spoke, mumbling softly to himself. "Most interesting."

Sparatus' mandibles twitched and he leaned back into the couch before closing his eyes. "Either way, human or no human. He's in the most anti-council space and aboard one of the biggest mercenary and pirate fortresses in the galaxy. We can't waste too much time worrying about him when we can't touch him." He said logically.

"We also can't ignore him." Korlak said from his own place, lowering his Omni-Tool. "Perhaps we should send a specialist to acquire this human." he suggested, shifting in the seat to get more comfortable.

Sparatus almost chuckled. "We've tried that, getting a Spectre into the Terminus undetected is quite difficult," the Turian paused. "Unless you have an idea?"

"A few, actually," Korlak breathed. "For the last few days of my appointment to Councillor I've been using my newly granted access to put together a specialist team for just such an occasion."

"You've been selecting dossiers for a specialist team?" Valern raised a brow in curiosity. "I didn't take you for a military man."

"You allowed my ascension to this post for a reason," Korlak breathed as he fiddled with his Omni-Tool. After several moments when the others didn't further comment he continued. "I'm sending you seven dossiers about individuals I have selected for this team. Please, hold your comments until after you've read them."

Their Omni-Tools blinked as they received the data. The three councillors looked down and the data scrolled across their screens. Eyes moving as they read through the files they were provided. Naturally, Valern was the first to lift his gaze to Korlak. "A most interesting set of individuals." he commented, "Wherever did you find them?"

"Wherever my councillor access could allow," Korlak replied with a hint of pride. They had to admit, the Volus had surprised them with this initiative action. And he had been correct, they'd allowed Korlak to rise to the position of Councillor because he was a very broadminded and objective driven individual by Volus standards. Like most of their species he valued that bottom-line and results for the cost. But as he just demonstrated for them, he was could think freely.

"Some of these individuals are also less than ideal for a team of specialists." Tevos added her own thoughts. "A Krogan? You realise the Krogan listed here is currently serving time on Purgatory for the

murder of two Turians and at least several dozen complaints about violence."

"Tame compared to most of their kind," Korlak replied easily. "Read the attached report on said Krogan." he gestured her on.

Sparatus grunted, looking up. "You've done your homework." He replied, looking to Tevos. "The file mentions the Krogan's details for the murder of the Turians. They were mercenaries, like him, about to take their spoils of a successful raid on a captured Quarian." he gave a disgusted grunt, "So, he's noble, is he?"

"In a sense," Korlak shrugged. "He's not barbaric, for a Krogan." the Volus went on. "And I believe he'll work on a team if granted a pardon and a sum of credits. He's a merc with standards. He'll be loyal to his pay check to us."

"And the others?" Valern asked.

"I too am curious to your choice of a leader for this unit," Sparatus spoke up, bringing up the file for the elected team leader. "Why choose him?"

On the file was the face of Special Response Team Sergeant Garrus Vakarian.

"Because he was a loose cannon cop who didn't play by the rules," Tevos said. "His name has passed me and the previous councillors desks more than once by the Executor. He's been recommended and then declined, for Spectre status and training four times." she crossed her leg over the other and rested her hands in her lap. "But his record has more ups than downs. He's kept clean, no history of addiction, experimentation. His leadership and marksman scores are easily impressive. He's combat effective."

"Ah, now I see," Valern nodded as the pieces fell into line. "Due to his out of the box thinking and methods, he'd fit well within such a diverse team and out in the Omega systems. Very clever, very interesting."

"So, you approve?" Korlak breathed, tilting his head to the side as he lowered his Omni-Tool back onto his side.

"I have no objections." Valern nodded. "If anything, I'm interested to see how this ends. Diverse team being sent into semi-hostile territory and pulled from all corners. Should be interesting."

Tevos gave her consent. And Sparatus did as well. "Assuming they operate well enough together, we can also use them for other operations." He'd seen teams like this before in the Blackwatch, teams that had no business being together and yet still performed above and beyond. It was rare, but like he said, he liked Garrus and the kid had a look in his eye that promised results. Sparatus was hoping he wasn't wrong.

Sparatus considered, then decided if they were going to put so much faith into their new councillor and a team that had almost no chance of success. Why not go all in? "And I believe I have a ship in mind for this specialist team." he said, gaining the attention of the other councillors. "The Albion. It's a new stealth frigate the

Hierarchy has been developing with the Salarrians. It's a stealth ship."

"Stealth?" Korlak blinked. "How did you manage that?"

"It wasn't easy," Valern mumbled, shaking his head. "Hiding engine heat is difficult, most sinks tend to melt or fail, but with a new system that we've developed, hopefully we'll see more improvements over the years." he explained. "But yes, the Albion is due for a real mission, isn't she?"

"She is," Sparatus nodded. "I'll forward you the details, Councillor Korlak, I trust you'll be most satisfied." The Turian began to type at his Omni-Tool.

"Oh," Tevos said, looking to Valern. "About our previous topic, what's the status on our facility on Noveria?"

"It's proceeding," Valern nodded while leaning back into the couch. "Thankfully the pod's systems were very adaptable, shame we killed him, Okeer might have had further knowledge than even we were aware of outside genetics." he added, sounding slightly disappointed.

Sparatus shook his head. "No point in worrying about that now. We best concentrate on the present, as it is we're stretching a vast amount of resources across several projects." he said. "The Quarian colonization of the three planet's given them being one of the more expensive."

That was very true. Since their re-introduction into the Council Member species list, the Quarrians had been making waves across the Citadel, job acceptances were through the roof since they now didn't have a stigma against them, well, the stigma remained but since the Quarrians had publicly been apologized to by the Councillors themselves very few were willing openly discriminate against them in the meantime Tevos had sworn that amount of air-car and technological repair stations across the Citadel had since almost doubled as the Quarrians embraced their techno savvy to its fullest.

One such Quarian was even pushing for Council support to make a giant ship "refitting" station, designed solely to eight salvage old ships, or refit them with newer technology. Civilian or Military, so long as it paid. Tevos herself was in full support of the idea, even Sparatus and Valern had expressed their interest in the project. But the current budget of affairs just didn't have enough to support it to any real degree.

Add in a dozen other side projects currently "On Hold" and more than a few others awaiting review, Tevos and the others would be very busy the coming months. She was glad now that they added a fourth to their ranks for this time, especially if he was able to make sensible independent decisions that could benefit them.

To her knowledge, Sparatus and the Primarch were still dealing with the military aftershocks felt at Falcus, many officers were being demoted and promoted, intel was being brought up and analysts were going crazy reviewing combat footage on the ground and in space. They'd even had more than a few personnel at the Relay that connected them to Human space to keep track and human mannerisms and watch for

any shady activity, nothing had been reported but that was to be expected. If the UNSC wanted to sneak anyone inside Council space they'd need only make a "jump" from their space to some system inside Council space.

Tevos sighed. Valern rose a brow, "Something wrong, Tevos?"

"Just thinking about how busy we're all going to be in the coming months." she replied with a dull smile as she sat up straight again.

Valern nodded, Sparatus chuckled. "Feeling your age, Tevos?" the Turian smirked.

"Just a bit." Tevos admitted. Korlak shifted, getting comfortable.

* * *

><p>End of Chapter Eighteen

_Welp, there's chapter eighteen! Council is still trying to get their ship moving smoothly, the UNSC is facing its own inner struggle between ONI and the top brass and TIM is being angry TIM. Stay tuned for the next chapter of Days of Our Galaxyâ€| I mean, __**In Infinitum: First Contact.
>_

_And in case people are STILL worried. I. did. NOT. Kill Nihlus... he's just yet to be introduced. Oh! And if you haven't already guessed, i'mma be making Garrus the council's "Shepard" in this case, thought about making it Saren, but i've plans for him and his brother yet, Speaking of which... You may all get to see them next chapter, just to remind you all they're still alive.
>

20. Chapter Nineteen

In Infinitum: First Contact

Chapter Nineteen

**February 3, 2581. Military Calendar.
>Omega station, Afterlife. Omega Nebula. 0900 Hours.
**Aria was furious. Actually, furious would be putting it very, very mildly in Leng's honest opinion. And to be fair he could hardly blame her. They'd both been made a fool of by the Special Tasks Group of the Salarian Union, and even worse? They'd wasted a rare instance where the infamous Shadow Broker offered them information for what may as well have been "free of charge" or rather a "Someday, and that day may never come" sort of deal.

"And those STG bastards-"

Aria cut herself off to biotically throw a chair across her private chambers where it smashed into the wall, denting it and warping the metal chair.

"_Ruined_ it all!" she finished, eyes furiously looking for something else to vent her frustrations upon. However besides Leng and her,

plus the bed and small table that held her strong drinks there wasn't much else she could throw without causing a huge mess.

She finally took a breath and Leng was sure if she had hair like a human she'd have run both her hands over it to smooth it back. Instead she raised one hand to massage her temples and the other rested atop her hip. "Are you done?" Leng asked simply, unperturbed by her anger.

The Asari's glare could have melted Titanium-A plating. But to Leng it merely caused his body to ever so slightly tense, the only sign he understood she was angry, he soon relaxed however and added. "I'll take that as a yes." he himself hadn't walked away from the operation unscathed. His stomach had suffered wounds from a point-blank shotgun blast and it was only the CNT muscle fibers and the reinforcement of his body suit that had saved him from a harsher fate than two broken ribs.

Aria huffed softly and walked over to her bed and sat down, crossing one leg over the other and laying back with her hands behind her head to support it in place of her plush pillows. She grunted softly and sighed. "I'm guessing you have orders from TIM, right?"

"TIM?" Leng raised a brow. For once he was without his visor, it hung at his chest in a small "pocket", so she could see those calculating dark eyes staring at her in confusion before realization struck. "Ah, yes— The Illusive Man." he mumbled dryly. "Clever. And yes, I do. It seems we're getting some transfers across the curtain."

"More humans?" Aria guessed.

Kai nodded. "Yes." he replied.

Bringing out a datapad and walking to her side to offer it to her. She peered at it, finding two dossiers. One was a human female, attractive but even in a picture she reeked of arrogance and the other looked far more humble, if a little too idealistic. "Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor. Like me they're one of TIM's more effective operatives."

"So they'll be loaded with tech like yours?" Aria asked, raising her own brow. She'd seen the vids from her men's head cams and heard the report, Kai had cut through doors with a sword, fired laser blasts from his palm and teleported, not just distances but through walls. Most Biotics could only dream of such talents.

When she asked how he accomplished it. His reply could only make her tilt her head. It had something to do with what he called "Slipspace" and some kind of grid of emitters across his entire suit that allows him to "teleport" using slipspace jumps. It was originally designed for use only with some human SpecOps group known as Spartans but his financial backer, TIM, had funded a separate project with the prototype tech and a combination of obscene wealth, death threats and sheer tenacity they'd given him a suit that allowed him to apparently teleport.

His palm laser also bypassed kinetic barriers as it was a true Directed Energy Weapon and so, those STG never stood a chance. He explained it could be fired for "quick shots" which were usually meant to suppress, but at the revelation of Kinetic Barriers

limitations he'd used it far more effectively. A charged shot from the thing could blow open doors, but it left a rather risky business of possibly exploding on him.

The palm laser, just like the suit, was still testing phase tech that Leng was being the guinea pig for. And it showed, when he arrived he'd been sick and she'd grudgingly had to call TIM herself to see if there was something he knew.

"_Ah yes, he's likely suffering from the effects of Slipspace radiation exposure, though his jumps are short he is exposed to some bursts of radiation while he traverses In the blink of an eye. Repeated jumps might explain why he's absorbed enough to make him sick_."

Aria had ordered a full time physician be brought to her and she had him check over Leng, he'd been cleared and his radiation poisoning would fade away on its own. He hadn't developed any cancers and within seven hours the human had been back on his feet and extremely agitated that his suit had been removed without his consent. Since being unconscious and possibly dying meant rules of modesty still had to be enforced.

"No, I'm still testing these devices. They'll probably bring essentials, but from the way TIM explained their transfer here, I am guessing it wasn't entirely planned ahead," Leng explained with a raise of his shoulders. "Things didn't go as smoothly for them and now they're being sent here where the UNSC won't readily hunt them."

"So we're the meat shields?" Aria grunted, rolling her eyes. "How comforting."

"Quite." Leng grunted while almost sounding amused.

But from the usual stony expression on his face Aria couldn't tell if he was just naturally this cold or if it was a constant state of professionalism. "Still, they'll prove useful. Lawson is a competent woman and Taylor is a skilled commando. Along with being a bit of an engineer." he tilted his head. "They _will_ be useful."

The Asari grunted in slight interest before sitting up and staring at Leng. "I hope so, I don't have any need for useless people." she said. "But, for now, bigger plans. With my rule on the station as strong as it ever was, guess this means we can focus on getting a handle on our space forces, then?"

Leng nodded. They would need more than a few cruisers and modified civilian ships, which was more a militia than real military power, they would need more militaristic ships and a larger powerbase to effectively put Aria as not only Omega's ruler, but also officially as the Terminus' as well. "We could hire ship manufacturers who work independently."

"Ships cost a lot of credits, Leng. Building just seven civilian class ships would be a stretch." Aria replied with a frown. "A lot more credits, or more leeway with the company itself." she explained.

"I'll put in a requisition order to TIM," Leng said, surprised how

easily the nickname stuck. "And have him send us some special gear to issue to your men here on the station. Along with some equipment for the station itself, you're saying it never got Kinetic barriers?" he asked.

"No, never had a need for it." Aria shook her head. "No one would attack Omega. What sort of equipment were you thinking to bring?"

"Energy shielding. Standard issue for UNSC ships, the station will be able to power them easily enough and it will make the station more defensible as a whole." Leng replied. "If we're to turn this into Omega's capitol seat of power, it must become a fortress."

"A fortress draws a lot of attention." Aria countered half heartedly. Honestly she liked where this was going, she was essentially being handed tech for free and her station was being fitted with better combat tools? She'd be a fool to decline. No, this was just verbal sparring with her personnel shadow.

"So do you." Leng returned smoothly with a face as unwavering as the gaze leveled on her.

"Point taken." Aria shrugged and turned her back on the man. "Walk with me."

"As you wish."

Aria stepped out of her private chambers and her two guards snapped to attention when the doors hissed open. She passed them and made her way along towards the main area of her club, her palace. Her Afterlife.

The Asari pirate queen didn't need to look behind her to know that Leng was there, following her closely while remaining out of sight. A feat, considering that the lights and activity of Afterlife left little shadows to cling to, little room to move without someone catching the flicker of a cloak. But somehow, the human behind her always did it as if it were second nature to him.

And it thrilled her more than she cared to admit.

She proceeded up the stairs up into the private booth reserved solely for her. She sat down and crossed one leg over the other before reclining back into the comfortable lounge chair. Aria leaned her head back a moment and when she looked back over she nodded to her top Lieutenant, a Batarian named "Xeb".

It was time to meet her people. Well, the important ones anyways.

The first in line was a Salarian. Decently cleaned and dressed for someone on Omega and a clear sign he had connections. "Ah yes, Ms. Aria." He greeted excitedly. "I'm glad you took the time to see me." he started.

She raised a hand. "Skip the pleasantries. There's a line and while I have time, I don't want to wait another few decades for you to die out to get this meeting done with." she said, and to his credit he didn't even appear the slightest bit put off. "So, what are you

trying to sell?"

"Ah yes! Very advanced design, spent years working on it!" The Salarian started, looking even more excited to try and sell his design to the Queen of Omega. "I have designs right here." he twisted his body, bringing up his arm and his Omni-tool glowed to life. He raised his fingers and typed a keyâ€|

Then a shot rang out. So small, it had almost drowned out by the clubs activity below. The Salarian turned his head, and was surprised to see Aria sitting there, unscathed and looking as if she had just been told a bad joke.

A flicker in the air and a dark armored human appeared before the Salarian. Expression even less amused than the Asari who was now wearing a cruel smirk as the black dressed human glanced down.

The Salarian looked down as well. And saw the gleaming edge of an archaic sword with a small, barely noticeable scratch in the side of the otherwise void black metal. The Salarian sword the blade was humming, almost in anger at being struck.

"Guess I owe you a few credits." Aria's voice brought the Salarian out of his flabbergasted stare.

The human didn't reply, instead he flicked the blade upwards and the Salarian's arm was severed clean from his body. The Omni-Tool flared to lifeâ€| and the arm melted awayâ€| but not the rest of the Salarian as the now screaming hitman had been intending. Clutching his bleeding stump while his arm and tool wasted away. He bit his lip and glared up at Aria.

"Xeb? Take him downstairs, patch him upâ€| then make him talk." Aria beckoned to the Batarian, who nodded and gestured for the two Turians in the far back of the booth. They quickly, and casually, carried the bleeding Salarian downstairs into the "private rooms".

Leng flicked his blade, clearing it of blood and sheathed it at his side. He stepped back once and turned to Aria, as if sensing her question he replied. "He turned his body to access his tool, and his arm moved in an angle that allowed for a headshot. He also raised his hand clear of the firing line." a pause. "More to ensure the shot wasn't altered in any way than his own safety."

"A one-hit assassin, huh?" Aria grunted, frowning. Not STG or Spectres then. They didn't believe in tossing one of their own to the wolves like that. And while some Spectres may be willing to take it all for the team they certainly wouldn't do it in the heart of Aria's own club.

Leng added. "I also doubt he'll talk."

A shrug was Aria's reply. "Doesn't hurt to try."

"We'll also never know what sort of weapon he was using." Leng muttered, turning to the "security chief", A Turian named "Dax" which was short for Daxirrillious. Honestly, why aliens chose such long names was beyond him. Then again, anything was better than Hanar names. "You scanned him?"

"He checked out." Dax replied with a nod. They'd all gotten use to Leng's appearance, and they all understood it perfectly clear that he was above their pay grade and only answered to Aria. And after he had stopped more than a few would be assassins at the door, on the club floor and now a second that reached the booth. They'd all learned to fear him.

Aria sighed and raised a hand to her forehead. "It's too early for an attempt on my life." she muttered like it was bad weather ailing her. "Anyways, Leng, you're dismissed. Dax, send the next one in."

Leng disappeared into the cloak and the flicker as he jumped soundlessly up into the support beams over their heads. Needless to say, the others in the line to see the queen of Omega looked more thoroughly spooked by the entrance and exit of the black clad human with a sword.

Soon, a more collected Asari with dirtied Eclipse armor was ushered in. And she began to explain that she wanted to work for Aria, not as a bodyguard or a dancer, but somewhat of an enforcer. Something to start up with. Aria arched a brow and listened with only half the attention she paid the Salarian.

A moment of consideration. All Eclipse mercs were given a right of passage by committing a kill. Most killed homeless junkies off the street, so long as it was recorded. Aria knew this, for she ran with Eclipse a few years back during a more troubled time on Omega. A sister had been very vocal about their methods.

So, she asked. "Who was your first?"

The Asari blinked. "Uh, an ex-Turian military Captain, he'd been making advances on me and-"

"You're hired." Aria said simply before she could finished. Frankly, the Asari had the makings of an ambitious subordinate, and if she overly ambitious rival if she could play her cards rights. Or if she thought she could. Nonetheless. Aria liked that little spark of daring. "Xeb, set her up with some gear and a post."

"On it." Xeb raised his Omni-Tool.

"Your name?" Aria probed, leaning forward with a tilt of her head.

"Morinth," The Eclipse offered a bit of a smile. It was almost inviting, suggestive.

"Morinth," Aria tested the name once and she decided she liked it. "Well, Morinth. I hope to see you're useful." she said before standing and moving over a step to stare into the eyes of her fellow Asari and newest lackey. "Who knows, we might work closer if you're particularly good." she whispered for only her and Morinth to hear.

The other had the place of mind to almost blush. But her lips turned from innocent smile into pure "I want you" territory. To which Aria's eyes danced with mischievous ideas.

And from his perch, Kai Leng frowned in the darkness. Something about

this other Asari felt wrong to his instincts. He could see it for all it was. Eyes stayed on her, demanded their attention. The armor she wore, while modest, somehow almost begged him to try and remove to see underneath it.

His inner male was demanding a piece of her.

His more prominent soldier/assassin conditioning told him to observe.

He reached over and fingers tightened on the handle of his HF-_Kusanagi_.

His senses were also telling him to keep his blade handy at all times around her.

â€|She did have a nice ass though.

Shit. Leng internally growled.

* * *

><p>Widow System, The Citadel.
Council Chambers, Garrus Vakarian.

>Garrus Vakarian was a lot of things at the moment. He was excited, worried, even more worried, nervous and thirsty and hungry. However, as he washed some nutrient bar, dextro of course, down with some dextro friendly carbonated water in the flavor of Palavan gripe fruit. He was less of the last two on the list.

He had been running drills with his team back in C-Sec's Special Response Team's HQ when he'd been called by the Executor personnel requesting his presence at the Citadel tower. When Garrus asked why he'd been told "just be there." and that had been that.

After a furious changing of clothes, storing his gear and then a very "law skirting speed flight" to the tower he'd made it in roughly fifteen minutes in what could have been a half cycle trip.

And now he'd been waiting for ten minutes while the Councillors had yet to appear, or the Executor.

Now, Garrus would be the first to admit that he had very, veryâ€| some would say "stupid reckless" methods for handling certain situations. He could and would admit that to the whole galaxy if asked. But he would also add on that at the time they had worked and lives had been saved and that, at the core, was his job in the long run.

So what if he'd crashed a few C-Sec aircars? And maybe a few civilians got caught in the middle of some of his more trickier sniper shots during stand offs? And okay, so he broke a detainee's legs every so often. He highly doubted that was all able to earn him a reprisal from the council itself.

Right?

_Yeah, _Garrus thought. _I'm screwed_. He sighed and his mandibles twitched with the shaky breath. So this was it for the great Garrus "Rules skirting" Vakarian. He's solved more than five dozen cases,

brought down twice as many perps! Most of them alive and semi-stable, mind you! And saved three times as many lives against odds that would make a Volus shudder and throw up! He'd beaten them all and now he was going to be discharged by the council and executor.

_You know what? _Garrus thought, staring down at his hands before clenching them. _Screw those bureaucrats! _

They had no idea what it was like to make the choices he did. He'd done the math in all those situation and people can call dumb luck all they wanted. He got to where he was because his trigger finger was faster than the bad guy's own. His aim better and reflexes sharper. He got to where he was because he was simply better than the opposition.

He stood from the waiting bench and rolled his neck. He was going to march into that room and tell the Council and Executor exactly how he felt and where they could stuff their "regard for proper procedure" and then! He would resign and give himself the last laugh. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of resigning.

Then he'd tell the Executor he could stuff the red taped _shatha dung_ that was the Dr. Salion case. Spirits! Garrus had never gotten over that. Nor would he until he had that Salarian's brain matter decorating a wall with a well placed shot.

"Mr. Vakarian?" an Asari attendant called to him, drawing his attention she smiled. "The Council is waiting for you."

"Thanks," Garrus rolled his neck. _This is it, Vakarian_. He thought as he proceeded up the stairs, turned to the side and proceeded to the back door leading into the Council's private chambers. Four pairs of C-Sec guards lined up along the sides.

He reached the door, the guard opened it and said. "They're expecting you."

No shit? Garrus' thoughts were filled with sarcasm as he entered the parted doors and there across the room was the Citadel Council. Minus the Executor. He stepped forward and noted they were all sitting patiently, Sparatus, Tevos and Valarn. The big Three.

He stopped at the table separating them. And then, Garrus opened his mouth. "Before you fire me, I want to say something." he declared, forcing his voice to turn to steel. "I regret nothing. Nothing. You hear?"

They blinked, surprised. It was Sparatus who opened his mouth to speak. "Mr. Vakarian, we-"

Garrus raised a talon, silencing his fellow Turian. "I am not done." He said, controlling himself even as his instincts, training and common sense was screaming at him for cutting off a Councillor, but also for the words to come. "In every one of those situations. I don't expect any of you to understand what its like. Oh, I know you all rule the galaxy from your ivory tower."

Tevos spoke this time. "Mr. Vakarian-"

"I am getting this off my chest!" Garrus grunted in annoyance. And

this time the council looked truly surprised as they quieted down. "I would have made every decision the same. Every choice I've made was in the right, my record speaks for itself. While I may not be Spectre material, or even Officer material. It should be noted that for all the damage I caused, I saved more lives than any of the "by the book" procedure would have done in a lifetime!"

"â€| " Valern coughed, then raised a hand when Garrus was about to shush him. "Go on." he said. Sparatus and Tevos nodded.

Garrus would have been surprised, but with given permission, his speech went back into full swing. "I bled for the innocents on this station, I put away the bad things in the dark and I took a team of hooligans that no one wanted and put them on a dung list team that the Executor has been looking for a reason to demote and disband. But y'know what's kept us afloat? My decisions and their skills. Not only me, my team deserves all the medals you can pin onto their chests!"

A breath before Garrus continued. "So you can call me a loose cannon, a mistake of the force and even a sorry excuse for a Turian. I don't care about any of that." he gave each Councillor a steely eyed glare that could put a Krogan in their place. He ignored how that didn't phase a single one of them and went on. "But I stand by it all. I did the right thing. I may not follow the rules to the letter, but if it saves more lives. You can bet your asses I'm going to choose that route. Every. Single. Time."

"And one final thing!" If Garrus wore a physical badge. He'd have ripped it off and threw at the table. "I hereby resign from C-Sec! So, what do you have to say to that?" Garrus said, proud and shoulders shaking in what could only be called relief.

A few moments of silence. Once they were sure Garrus was done, it was Tevos who looked to her fellow councillors before back to Garrus. "Well, that's a relief to hear, Mr. Vakarian," she smiled slightly.

I bet, Garrus though sourly. He'd just saved them time.

"Because I've got a job offering for you," Sparatus added now and drew his attention. "And since you're now free from work, I thought we could discuss the details of your first assignment."

To say Garrus' sour mood turned into one of pure confusion in the blink of an eye would been an understatement. It went FTL. "â€|Wha?" Garrus managed when he fully registered what his fellow Turian was telling him. They had a job?

Sparatus chuckled, Valern and Tevos both just gave slight amused smiled. "A shock, I know." Sparatus said. "But yes, we've a new job for you. I have the details on my Omni-Tool, if you're interested?" An arch of a brow plate.

"â€|I suppose I can look the details over quickly." Garrus said, unsure how to react to his well thought out and overly prepared speech. Oddly enough, he didn't feel like soiling himself anymore though. His Omni-Tool raised and he received the files. And once he opened them and a few moments of reading in thoughtful silence he looked back up to the Councillors.

"Soâ€¦ you plan to hand me a special assignment that essentially grants me free operational movement, meaning my decisions are go so long as they fit within the objective of capturing, failing that, killing a human in the Terminus systems, on Omega, the heart of Aria T'Loak's empire." He glanced down again, skimmed to another file. "Using a never before seen stealth frigate that the Turian and Salarian unions were working on. With a combat team comprised ofâ€¦" another skim.

"Ah, were we go." Garrus cleared his throat. "A krogan serving time, a pair of Quarian hackers, an Elcor, Turian and lastlyâ€¦" he blinked. "Amâ€¦ I reading this right?" he blinked again and looked at them. "A Valieri Archon?"

Valieri were rare. Very, very rare. The flight capable species tended to stay on their homeworld and even though they had the technology they had never achieved Space Flight, after the Council found them a century and a half ago they'd found sprawling cities walled off from the rest of the heavily forested planet. Plains where crops were grown, animals allowed to roam and breed. Garrus believed the only way for a Valieri to leave the planet was for trading ships to allow one aboard.

And that was a rare occurrence. Most were content to stay on their planet and prey to their gods, the Thradons, and it was these Gods that told them that reaching the stars would be their doom. And so in reverence the species had never left atmosphere. Not that they would need to.

Garrus had seen pictures, their homeworld was beautiful. Pollution was almost nonexistent and if it weren't for the strict policies of the Valieri leadership, it would become a prime real estate planet. He also believed that since it possessed no fleet that it would be a prime target for pirates from the Terminus systems.

But that belief had been blown out the water when thirty years ago a massive raid fleet had attempt to send ships downs. Only for their ships to be shot down from massive Surface-to-Space guns. And when the fleet began to try and clear to ground to shut them down, the Batarian fleet suffered a series of mutinies that fractured it, friendlies fired on friendlies and not a single ship touched the ground whole.

"You are indeed reading that correct," Sparatus confirmed with a nod. "A rare, but powerful asset, so try not to get her killed, will you? Relations with the Valieri areâ€¦ misty, as is." he warned lightly.

"â€¦Sir, forgive my lack of respect in this," Garrus said as if his earlier speech hadn't been anything but. "But this sounds like a bad movie plot."

Sparatus shrugged. "I said I liked you, Vakarian. And I wasn't lying. Your earlier resignation proves to us that you're the right person for the job." he explained, "You get results and make good decisions when procedure would end in otherwise bad ends. You've charisma and you're most certainly willing to take more than a few bullets for the team. That's why we're trusting you to put this team together, take our newest ship and bring us back that human and help us find out

exactly what he's doing in the Terminus systems with Aria T'Loak."

Sparatus' eyes bore into his own. "So, do you accept our offer?"

Garrus stared back and his eyes flashed with a myriad of thoughts before finally they steeled and with a snap of a salute he said. "Sign me up."

Sparatus did the Turian equivalent of a smile. "Good. Your ship will be waiting for you in docking bay C-Nine, a private dock. In the cycle. Here's your credit chit," he produced a chit and handed it to the Turian, who scanned it into his Omni-Tool. "Satisfactory?"

"It's a blank Chit." Garrus looked at them. "I don't, I'm not sure. I" Sparatus raised a talon.

He warned Garrus. "Don't spend too much."

"Right, sir, thank you Councillors." Garrus saluted, turned and marched out. With just the barest hint of a bounce in his step. Once the doors closed behind him Sparatus sat down.

"That was certainly interesting." Valern commented idly as he began to check some reports over his Omni-Tool.

Sparatus nodded his agreement. "It was, if I had any doubts about him before. They're gone now."

Tevos chuckled, shaking her head. "That speech though! It certainly brightened the day."

"Just a bit." Valern and Sparatus nodded to themselves.

* * *

><p>End of chapter nineteen

**Who attempted to off Aria if not the Council? Can I be more obvious with what Morinth is doing? Is the Council still smart? Does Garrus "whoopie!" behind closed doors when given a "buy what you need regardless of price" chit? Find out next time on In Infinitum: First Contact! **

PS. Yes, I know this chapter took awhile. Honestly, I had such a loss of muse that it physically could have smacked me and I would have been "meh" because I could not find it. So, I decided to just type what came to mind, added some humor in there and yeah! so, hope you enjoyed!

**pps. Also, yup! Introducing a new species, which I briefly mentioned back a few chapters (I cannot remember which.) And yeah, the Valieri, gave some insight to their world! And that they can fly! So, gonna see how that goes, been toying with a few ideas, and any who are curious, simply send a PM or leave a review and I shall answers any questions best I can without spoiling my future plot ideas for them. (And I have a few.)>

****Toodles! Yes... yes I did say toodles.**
>

21. Chapter twenty

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Twenty****

****February 5, 2581. Military Calendar.**
>UNSC Colony _Eridanus II**_**, Epsilon Eridani System.**
1000 Hours.
>_BOOM!_

The breaching charge kicked the high-class door in and knocked it clear five feet inwards and before the smoke could even clear five armored figures rushed inside, their blue colored armor glinting off the beams of light that made it through the haze of smoke. Their weapons, a combination of HBR60s Battle rifles and M100CAWS shotguns raised and swept the lavish room.

The couches were untouched, the TV was off and no a single thing stuck out to the five armored figures. MJOLNIR Armor Mark. VI [Gen 2]. Their weapons barrels moved slowly across the area before the one at the head of the group said. "Majestic four, two, sweep the rooms."

The two, Majestic's Four and Two broke off from their formation moved into the rear hallways of the large three room apartment. The disappeared from view shortly after entering. "Three, with me, secure upstairs. Five, guard this door."

The fifth man nodded his armored head and stepped back into the door, HBR60 Levelled down the hall they'd come to get into the building while the other two moved to the stairway leaving to the second floor. Why did an apartment have a second floor? It may as well have been a penthouse!

Majestic's one and three moved up the stairs, which groaned slightly under the weight of their MJOLNIR armor. But thankfully, it hadn't been the original model VI, since the Gen 2 models were made to be lighter for civilian friendly conditions, and cheaper overall. Once they reached the top, they didn't see any extra hallways, doors. Just two seats and a table.

"_This is two_," Majestic' two's voice came over the coms. "_Rooms are clear. Not a single sign of use._"

"Fuck," Majestic one cursed as he lowered his M100. "Alright, Majestic, form up at the entrance to the apartment, looks like we got the decoy." Demarko grunted, shaking his armored head and kicking himself internally for having a wasted a perfectly good C12 breach charge.

The rest of Majestic assembled in the hall and Demarko lifted his helmet and brought his wrist up, he tapped a key and a small circular holoprojector kicked in. And soon, appeared the Commander overseeing the operation. "_Commander Frederick here, what is it, Demarko_?" the

grizzled veteran asked, arms crossed over his chest.

Commander Frederick, one of the last SPARTAN-IIs and one of the best tactical commanders in the UNSC, and currently overseer of the Spartan deployments for Operation: KING and QUEEN to apprehend ONI elements involved in the destruction of the _Far Away_. Needless to say the Commander demanded the utmost respect from the series IVs.

"Sir, our location was a bust, not a single shred of evidence they were here." Demarko reported gruffly, weapon across his back and helmet under his arm. "I'm thinking Intelligence dropped the ball on this one. Any reports from the other teams?" he asked. He'd been hoping he and Majestic would get the lucky shot but it now up to Crimson, Indigo and Cyan teams to hopefully catch their two chess pieces.

"_Cyan and Indigo radioed in, their locations are clean_." Demarko could hear the softest edge in the Commander's voice. "_Majestic, move to extraction, once Crimson confirms their own findings we'll be pulling out off the planet and moving back to Reach_."

"Sir." Demarko nodded, closing the communications line and sliding his helmet back on. "Alright, Majestic, let's form up and roll out. Naturally, drinks are on me."

"Damnit," Majestic five grunted. "Well, guess we can just hope _wonder team_ Crimson gets them, right?"

"Pfft, I doubt it."

"Yeah."

"Stow it," Demarko barked, shaking his head. "God you're all still so bitter." though he secretly agreed, if three Spartan teams failed then it was doubtful Crimson would have much more success.

* * *

><p>Crimson Team
**Across the city inside some rundown warehouse in an scheduled to be repurposed drydock, several men wandered around the abandoned facility. Easily more than two dozen visibly just moving around, some sat on scaffoldings and others sat in clusters around looking more like a pack of gangsters hanging in some place they considered a good hangout.

And through the scope of the 12.52X42mm fin stabilized High Velocity-Armor Piercing loaded Sniper Rifle System model 96. Produced on Mars from Misriah Armories and outfitted to Spartan IV commando teams on 2578. They various people could be brushed off as ordinary street thugs.

But only if you were anyone other than Crimson Four, who watched as a pair walked along the perimeter fence, the way the two mens jackets swayed with their steps revealed the fabric holsters for M6H handguns. UNSC issued hardware in the hands of common street thugs?

Not likely.

"Yeah." Crimson Four said to her team as she eyed three around some large metal debris that had likely once been a ship's hull armor. "They're definitely guard details. Two are keeping way too much to the perimeter."

"_You willing to stake possible civilian lives on that_?" Crimson's leader, Crimson One, asked through the team com.

"Yup," The sniper responded instantly with a sure-fire tone. "Definitely. I spot three on the upper catwalks, they keep pacing back and forth, but I can see some cover placements on the guard rails that sticks out from the aged appearance of the metal around the site." She paused, then added. "They're also paying attention, overwatch detail if ever I saw one."

"_Sure you're not just itching to dome someone_?" Came the deep voice of Crimson three. "_You're awfully eager to engage in combat_." her teammate further commented.

"_Three, radio silence. Five, you in position_?" One asked, tone stern but with an underlying tone of annoyance.

"_Affirmative_." Came Five's softer voice, a stark contrast to Three's. "_Just say the word and I'll shake the hornet's nest_."

There was a brief pause as Four tracked the targeting reticle over one of the overwatch detail's head. Her rifle was loaded with HV-AP ammunition, so the barrel had been replaced with a "Suppressor" barrel. Much more durable than the standard "screw on" ones used by most military outfits inside the UNSC. It cut down noise by a good sixty-four percent and eliminated the threat of muzzle flashes revealing her position. Only brief problem was the leftover gasses from the shot leaving the barrel in tiny puffs of smoke.

Drawbacks? It lowered the velocity of the rounds somewhat and since the internal barrel and the suppressor were one, accuracy was also hurt. A massive drawback for those hoping to hit targets outside of 1200 meters but for Four's purpose of hitting her current targets at 542 to 531 meters? She was granted pinpoint accuracy. So, she didn't bother to overly correct her aim and the flight time between such a distance would also help her to not rely so heavily on "trailing" her targets should things get hectic.

She didn't train all those months under Master Chief Petty Officer Linda Walcott in Extreme Range and Target Elimination training or "ERTE camp" as some of the others called it to be hindered by such simple conditions at this distance. Why they couldn't just call it "be taught by the best Sniper in UNSC recorded history" school was always a question. Then again, it was longer to say and probably wouldn't catch on.

"_Alright, Five. You're got the green_," One finally said over the com. "_Shake em up, Four. You're green light to eliminate if they post an actual threat outside of just screaming and pointing_."

"Orders understood," Four replied, finger that had once been free and resting on the trigger guard of the rifle gingerly slid onto the trigger of the powerful rifle and applied a subtle pressure to test

the strength of the weapons trigger resistance. "Awaiting." she mumbled.

And waited for the show to start.

From his position, Crimson Five counted to five. Then he stood straight and let the active camouflage field around his body drop and revealed himself standing at full height in the center of the entirety of the three dozen or so people that they suspected as being ONI watchdogs for a secret facility that may or may not have housed their chess pieces.

When a fully armored Spartan in blood red WETWORK variant armor appeared. M6H sidearm in one hand and the other clutching what appeared to be a M20 Flashbang. The men's reactions were mixed, but when the majority reached for their concealed military grade sidearms and the other half raised hands to shield their eyes their real purpose became quite clear to the armored Spartan and his team.

They were ONI watchdogs.

The men on overwatch were the first to fall, one's chest burst as a sniper round from Four tore through him. The other two, seeing their fellow die, barely had further warning before they too fell back against the railing, slumping in death. Five raising his suppressed M6H and fired one of the large handgun rounds, two in fact, into the center mass of the nearest man, who sputtered blood and fell back dead before even hitting the ground.

His other arm lazily tossed the grenade into the air where it detonated five feet up, the bright flash and boom blinded those within twenty-five feet, and added deafness to those within fifteen and for those within ten feet felt unsteady on their feet as disorientation washed over them. By the time flash cleared after 0.6 seconds the Spartan was gone.

And Crimson's One, Two and Three opened fire from across the street from atop a three storey storage building that belonged to some company or another. For now it was on loan to Crimson as their own private "high ground" to bring down the current enemy dogs in place.

Five rushed forward, armored boots barely thudding despite the heavy weight of the armor he was encased in. His team were all using Promethean vision so even cloaked he could move with in impunity without threat of friendly fire. A man's brain matter splattered across his visor as half his skull was reduced to pulp.

"Too slow." Four teased, tone flat yet somehow still managing to sound smug.

Five frowned behind his visor and promptly fell to a knee and spun around, eyes narrowing as he emptied the remainder of his six shots from his M6H, sweeping the area for the hostiles that hadn't been gunned down in the initial volley of gunfire. The few brave enough to go up against Spartans ducked into cover as those six "hasty" shots found rather close to their marks.

Five broke into a sprint and reached down onto his thigh and gripped the handle of his combat knife, he drew the matt black blade and the

silver edge glinted with, in his opinion, thirst for blood. He concentrated and then the world blurred momentarily and he reappeared behind one of the gunmen's cover. Behind both of them. The first to go was the one standing.

The man was ejecting the magazine of his M6H when he noticed Five standing there, before he could utter a word Five reached forward and took the man's neck in a vice grip, silencing him while he stepped to the side and nearer to the crouching man who peered around their cover to check for targets.

He didn't even gasp when Five's knife was plunged into and through his neck. Jerked out so it severed the spine. He dropped both bodies, one had been half-way beheaded and the other asphyxiated while his teammate was killed.

Five felt his world blur again and he appeared both three of them, his knife formed silver lines across the air itself as his arm blurred, swiping the air before two of the gunmen. Their throats split and the third, in his panic, leapt from his cover to raise his weapon only for Four to cut him down with a well placed round to his temple.

A ping on his motion sensor and Five turned and with a flick of his arm the blade flew in a twirling dance through the air into the forehead of an overhead gunman, who fell back as the knife pierced his skull and brain. Before the body could hit the scaffolding rails Five caught the handle of the blade and the body slid off with a spurt of blood.

Everything was silent.

"_Well_," One said over the com as he, Two and Three hopped off the three storey building and landed on the street, leaving small cracks across the pavement as they landed and moved forward like that wasn't a thing humans shouldn't be able to do. "_If you two are quite done showing off, let's go see if our chess pieces were actually here_."

"_Right_." Four replied. "_I can't see in there, so you're on your own. Course with Promethean vision, pfft, what's the point of walls_?"

The others agreed. One activated his own, indicated by the way his visor "pulsed" as he gazed up the stairs into the facility. When he shook his head and sighed. Five and the others knew their prey wasn't here. "Place is empty, but maybe not clean. Two, Three, move up and secure what you can." he ordered, nodding the two upwards.

They gave brief nods and rushed up the stairs in strict order, their HBR60s raised towards the side and top of the stairway just to be safe.

One sighed when his wrist-projector pinged him. "Guess the Commander found us, huh?" he grunted in amusement. The leader of Crimson reached up with one hand and removed his RECON variant helmet, revealing a middle aged, slightly scarred visage of Crimson Team's leader Adrien Baralai. His short, crimson dyed hair was disheveled due to the helmet. But otherwise he appeared fully comfortable as he raised the com and accepted the connection.

"_Crimson One, we're reading you half a klick away from your original theater of operations_." Commander Frederick said, crossing his arms across his chest and stern frown on his aging face.
"_Explain_."

Adrien replied crisply. "Sorry sir, our original location was clean. But we caught a local being very nosy and decided to ask him some questionsâ€¦ he pointed us to another location, the one we're at now. Sir." He relayed, glancing upwards at the large structure before looking back to Frederick. "We've just cleared thirty-eight armed men, military equipped and using military defensive positions. We investigated-"

"_Without confirming orders with me first, Crimson_," the Commander cut him off.

Adrien nodded. "Sorry, sir, but we felt the situation demanded quick response. I accept full responsibility, once we're finished checking over her-"

"_Crimson One, Two's got something_." Three reported over the com, catching both he and the Commander's attention.

Adrien looked to the Commander who nodded. "What is it, Two?"

"_Computer terminal, looks like it's locked down tight. I'm going to try and crack I-Oh shit! Failsafe, clear ou_-" One turned in time to see Three blown clean down the stairway and slamming down onto the ground, his shields sputtering as they took the brunt of the blast wave and impact force

"Crimson Two!" Adrien shouted, cutting the communication off and sliding his helmet on and moving up the stairway until he reached the smoking entrance. He activated his Promethean vision and stepped into the black smoke filled room. He spotted the location against the wall where the terminal had once been. It was heated up like a Christmas tree.

And across the room was Crimson Two, clutching something to his chest with his right arm and the left had been burned off at mid-bicep, blood didn't drip and instead it had been cauterized. His own shields were sputtering and sparking, the right side of his armor was smoking and the black undersuit of his armor looked like it had bubbled then cooled to a more wavy mess.

Two groaned and rolled onto his back. One moved forward, kneeling and saying, "Oi! Charles, you alright?"

"Yeahâ€¦" Two groaned again and sat up with a shake of his head. "I managed toâ€¦ getâ€¦" he lifted his left arm, or what was left of it. He stared at it for a moment before closing his eyes and taking a deep calming breath. "Am I missing half my arm?" he asked.

"Yeah," Adrien replied bluntly, glad to see his teammate was fine enough to joke about a burned off limb. "The hell happened?" he demanded, grabbing the Spartan by the stump and pulling him to his feet.

"Triggered a failsafe when I tried to crack the encryption, however, I did manage to pull this," Two lifted a single data-chip to show it to Adrien. "It was plugged into the console, thought if I was going to die, I may as well see if I could do something useful." Charles explained, then gave his left arm an experiment twist. "I'm gonna need a new arm, huh?"

"We'll have one vat grown for you by the end of the week." Adrien rolled his eyes. "What was the explosive?"

"From the burns?" both Spartans turned and saw Three stepping inside, he walked over to the charred wall, waving a hand in front of his face to push away some of the smoke. "Guessing Thermite. Nothing much left of the console sides ashes. Two did the right idea in pulling the chip and jumping."

"Did jump, tried to raise a Hardlight shield with a single arm, formed an small barrier and then, well, the blast and heat sent me back before I could proper pop one." Two explained with a shrug. "So, think this has anything useful? I did just lose an arm for it."

"It better be, Commander Frederick found out we ditched the operation zone." Adrien explained and his two teammates stilled in silent comprehension of the fact that one of their hardest COs was blatantly aware of the fact they'd left their designated area of operations. Even if it was to chase another possible lead.

"_Oooh._" Came Four's voice through the com. "_Busted._"

Adrien sighed and said, "Alright, Crimson, everyone outside and I'll call for extraction. Two, you sure you're okay?"

"Don't worry sir." Two saluted with his remaining arm. "Besides some missed happy time tonight, Nothing serious."

"Too much information, Twoâ€¦ too much information."

Crimson stepped down the ramp and gathered in the clearing in front of the abandoned facility. Adrien com'd for pickup and mentally prepared himself for the berating, and possible charges of insubordination, possibly going AWOL or desertion charges he and his team could be facing. But, well, they'd always told him to trust his gut feelings in training and even again in Spartan school so he did just that.

If he was lucky, he could put the entirety of the blame on himself and spare his team their positions at the very lest.

"Sir," Five drew One's attention as the man stepped up to him. "I searched the bodies, No identification. Not even a single spare credit." he explained, cocking his armored head to the side. "If you're not sure they're ONI, I think this seals it."

"You're right," Adrien sighed. Perfect, just what they needed to add to the UNSC-vs-ONI dramatic performances that were currently plaguing HIGHCOM. If ONI elements were acting on their own, or god forbid, on orders from ONI brass than there would a lot of flak about to slam into the shady intelligence organization. For now, Adrien would worry about just getting his team back onto the _Last Sunday _and back to Reach.

"Hey, Twoâ€|" Snickered Three. "Need a hand?"

"Oh _fuck _off."

Adrien sighed. _Just another day for the mix and matched personality shit-storm that is Crimson Team._ He thought and smiled wryly.

* * *

><p>Widow System, The Citadel.
Docking Bay C-9, Garrus Vakarian.

>To Garrus' surprise, the _Albion_ had been waiting for him alright. He had thought he would take a shuttle to it while it stealthed out in space for him to board, but no. It was right there, attached magnetic clamps and its crew, of mixture of Turian, Salarian and Asari were loading contents into its cargo bay atop hover trays. And to add to his surprise a few of his team were already there.

The two Quarrians, Dahl Kadam nar Volter and Lila "Sparky", were helping along, some of the Turians sent them dirty looks, watching them for theft, but the Asari were more open, smiling and accepting the help, a few even went as far as to chat with them.

He'd read their files. Dahl was a Quarrian who had been on pilgrimage when he'd been arrested for Vagrancy on the Citadel, only recently released due to the political situation with the newly inducted Quarrians. And Lila, or Sparky, as she preferred. Had been a hacker that been causing a bit of a ruckus by trying to hack into the security files of a night club called Chora's Den.

C-Sec had come down hardâ€| and then laid off when they realized the security files Lila had been trying to get were of its corruption by selling redsand and several accounts of bribery and blackmail. A small ring of corruption had been found thanks to the efforts of a Quarrian. Now? She was working for him aboard the Albion, along with Dahl they were his primary combat engineers.

Garrus was partially reassured, he knew all Quarrians received combat and hand-to-hand training before leaving on Pilgrimage, but he was looking forward to making sure their training matched his own prowess as best to their abilities. He didn't need any weak links in his ranks during a mission that required a more subtle touch.

The next one to catch his eyes was the Turian, unlike the crew of the Albion who wore their crew uniforms, this one was wearing a Phantom Medium armor with his helmet resting on the crate next to him. He was adjusting the targeting computer on his Widow. An AM rifle meant to bring down vehicles. Not exactly something you'd use on infantry unless you liked the bloody results.

The Turian was also a bareface, no markings to signal his colony of birth and despite Garrus' open minded ways, he didn't like barefaced Turians. Anyone who didn't wear their home colony's marks proudly were not to be trusted. He tried not to frown, he figured he could at least attempt to give his fellow Turian the benefit of the doubt.

He turned and made his way over to him, when he approached the other Turian took notice and stood, shouting. "Officer on deck!"

The reaction was instant. The workers set their crates down, snapped off salutes, apparently none noted his arrival until then. And upon the other Turian's announcement, they all took notice and gave Garrus his due respect. The bareface saluted as well. The only ones who didn't snap to were Lila and Dahl, who continued to push their hover cart along to continue loading.

Garrus hated it when people saluted him. He told his team day one that if he entered the locker room he didn't want to hear "officer" or whatever, he just wanted to be known as Garrus or Vakarian. Still, he nodded and saluted back, saying. "At ease."

The loading bay got back to work, the bareface nodded. "Commander Vakarian," he greeted, setting the Widow down on the crate beside his helmet after the weapon collapsed. "Sergeant Saren Arterius." Saren offered his hand.

Garrus took it in his and they shook briefly, politely. "Commander Garrus Vakarian," Garrus returned introduction even though they both knew each other, Garrus through Saren's dossier and Saren, being an Arterius, likely had more than a few friends inside the Hierarchy due to his family name. "I trust you've been briefed?"

"Yes, sir." Saren drawled with a nod, glancing at the two Quarrians as they passed them by, the look was a dirty one that neither of the pair noticed, or ignored, Garrus couldn't tell at his angle. When Saren turned his eyes back to Garrus he added, "I don't like their presence aboard a Hierarchy and Salarian union ship." he stated bluntly, avoiding protocol for "speaking freely".

Garrus wanted to say something along the lines of "says the bareface", but held his tongue lest he earn the ire of one of his new subordinates. "They're our allies as much as the Salarians and Asari now," he paused, then added. "Besides, they're both good, their dossiers have them as dependable individuals, Quarrian or no."

Saren blinked, as if genuinely surprised to see one of his own defending what most Turians called "suit rats". There was a flash of annoyance in Saren's blue eyes before it passed and a certain amused glow entered them when the bareface said, "You sound like my brother." he shook his head.

Garrus chose not to pry into that subject since family was a very important subject for Turians, so he changed topics. "You've been briefed?"

"I caught snippets here and there from gossip." Saren replied honestly. "Nothing solid, all I know for certain is we're going into the Terminus systems and the Council have given you tactical command." he tilted his head. "Mind clearing up?"

"We're being tasked with covertly retrieving, or failing that, killing a—" Garrus paused to think his next words over. Was the human in the Terminus rogue? Or working for the UNSC? It could be taken lightly either way and it would still be their mission. But Garrus hated giving the wrong assumptions. "Rogue human agent who's been operating out in Omega." he finished.

That caught the bare face's attention. "Human, you say?" Saren actually sounded a bit more eager, his posture grew more attentive.

"On Omega? Sounds like a good time."

"Yeah," Garrus said in agreement. A rock with more criminality on it? Hardly a place Garrus wanted to spend his shore leave, but if a firefight broke out then he'd hardly have to worry about "civilian" casualties when everyone on Omega likely had a hand in one crime or another. "A freefire zone if ever there was one."

"Mhm," Saren nodded, then grabbed his helmet and Widow. Attached the former to his back, his helmet slid on, and then slid back to reveal most of his face. "Well, I'm going to get settled in, if we're done here, Commander?"

"We are," Garrus nodded.

Saren nodded, turned and proceeded towards the central elevator, where he disappeared once the doors closed.

Saren gone, Garrus turned to see if anymore of his team would be arriving. Chosen or not they didn't get here by the time the Albion was done loading all their gear up then they were being left behind. That was when he spotted two larger figures stepping out of the main elevator into the loading bay. It was the Elcor and Valieri.

He took them in, the Elcor's name was "Kredak", Primarily a Krogan name. Part of the Elcor military bombing core, covering his body were Kinetic barrier "bands" across his arms and legs. Providing barrier protection. He was also wearing a simple civilian harness with a pack, a large pack. _What is he carrying in that thing? A second Elcor? _Garrus thought in wonder.

And then, the Valieri.

Sure, Garrus had seen pictures and videos, read up on the reclusive species and even tried to get some combat footage, but the results were so small and vague that he only expected a few things. He hadn't prepared for the sight that greeted him.

Feran stood taller than Garrus, topping him at eight and nine inches. Her torso was covered in a black metal armor with silver trimming, a slight figure, her waist was thin, but he could see the muscles, which he knew were dense enough to make most other species jealous of their surprising strength. Glowing golden "lights" along the armor told him her barriers were up. Her thighs and groin were covered by the same black with silver trimmed armor, but her knees down were open.

She was covered in pale blue scales that seemed to have a glow to them. Garrus noted. Her feet were double jointed, like one of those Sangheili the Human's had as allies. But where they had hooves, she had three toes, and each was tipped with a slightly curved talon, and the heel of her foot also had one.

She walked on the toes of her feet, leaving the rear talon up. Nothing covered her feet. Eyes moving up, her hands were much the same. Three fingers, ending in smaller claws, a thumb. Slender build up to the armored shoulders. A slightly elongated neck leading up to her head. Which was covered by a black mask with two glowing red "eyes" and a pair of horns that curved from the forehead of the mask back around and over her hair, which was silver in color and tied

back in three tails.

Her face obscured, he couldn't make out her expression, her mouth was covered, the entire front of her face was, so Garrus was almost not missing Saren's barefaced mug. In her left hand was a spear, of all things! Garrus had heard Valieri used odd weaponry, but to see her holding a silver, golden and red two pronged spear in hand, which clanged softly every time she took a step since she was using it as a bit of a weapon stick.

And then came the real eye catcher, on her back were two large wings, folded so she didn't take much room. He'd heard they could fly, he'd seen the pictures, but he hadn't prepared himself for that. They seemed big, and since she was taller, he could imagine the span of them would be impressive. They were black, covered in scales, obviously, but each had a tuft of black fur at the main joint of the wing, where a single curved talon rested, polished and sharp. With five "fingers" spread out and between them was light, leather like skin to catch the air for flying.

Combine super dense muscles with a Valieri's naturally lightweight bone structure and Garrus was now very convinced she could fly.

"Kredak, Feran." Garrus spoke finally when he was done with his observations. He approached the pair, "Glad you two could make it."

The pair stopped, the Elcor nodded slightly. "Genuine: It is a pleasure to meet you as well, Commander. Curious. Were you going to disembark soon?" the Elcor asked with a tilt of his head.

"As soon as we're done with loading the cargo," Garrus nodded, gesturing the last three crates being loaded onto the Albion. "Soon, I suggest you two get settled in." he advised them, looking to Feran. "I admitâ€ it is an, ah, honor, to work with a Valieri." he said, trying not to sound sheepish, even as he had to look up to both of them.

The Valieri turned her head down to him and even through the red lenses of her mask he could feel her gaze. It was almost heavyâ€ like an physical weight was pressing down on him. He shifted, remembering she was also an Archon, meaning she was the biotic equivalent of a Vanguard. Finally, she spoke, tone a smooth hiss, muffled only slightly by the mask. "Commander Vakarian. I am Feran."

"Garrus Vakarian," Garrus would have offered his hand, but he felt that handshakes weren't a thing in their society, with the claws. "Have either of you been briefed?"

"We are to hunt a human who operates out of Omega in the Terminus systems," Feran replied as if it were common knowledge, to Garrus' shock. She continued with a tilt of her head. "Our last team mateâ€ he isn't on the Citadel?"

"â€Uh," Garrus cleared his throat, confused but not willing to question just how she knew that part. "Yes, we have to go pick him up on a prison ship, the Purgatory. Operated by Blue Suns on the edge of the Terminus systems." he explained, gesturing the two on board.

"Now, lets go, the sooner we all get settled in, the sooner we can begin our mission."

"Affirmative," Kredak spoke with another nod. "Of course, Commander." he lumbered on past Garrus, moving into the cargo hold of the Albion, politely excusing himself past a few of the crew to get to the elevator to get to the crew quarters.

"As you wish." Feran rolled her neck, and Garrus could hear the pops that travelled along it, before she too stepped past him, one of her wings almost brushing against his arm as she did so. Catching up to the Elcor when he stepped into the Elevator.

When Feran was far enough, the weight that had been pressing down on Garrus' shoulders subsided and he breathed out in relief. "Wellâ€|" he said to himself as he turned and rolled his neck. "This is going to be one interesting mission."

He only hoped it didn't end with him in a box and the brand spanking new ship in pieces. Or worse, in the hands of pirates under Aria's employ. The thought of what she could do with a stealth frigate honestly made Garrus' mandibles itch in a bad way. That said, he was going to do everything in his power to stop that from happening.

Moving into the Albion, he called the elevatorâ€| and stood there, for awhile.

How slow was this thing?

Another three seconds passed before the doors opened and he stepped inside. He tapped the key leading to the CIC and the doors closed, then he began his ride up. And up and up aaaaand up. Four seconds passed and he was just almost there.

He raised his Omni tool. "Commander Vakarian to Engineering," he said, waiting before a Turian's voice came through.

"_Yes, Commander_"

"Who's in charge of Elevator maintenance?" Garrus asked, patient as ever.

"_That would be Private Senius, sir_"

"Have him reassigned to latrine detail, and get one of the Quarrians to make this spirits forsaken thing go faster." Garrus closed the com and sighed. Then! The doors parted and he was greeted to the sight of the CIC. He stepped onto the deck, someone spotted him and was about to shout when Garrus raised a hand, shaking his head. "Just give me a status report, we ready to leave?"

"Sir," the tech, an Asari, rather attractive if Garrus did think so, nodded, "Closing bay doors and Citadel control has cleared us for take-off," she informed him. "Bridge just needs your go ahead."

"Alright, I'll make my way up there," Garrus stepped past her and proceeded along the long walkway, the galaxy map, podium for over viewing it, various tech personnel, mostly Asari, it seemed, a few

specialist Turians and a Salarian. When he reached the bridge, he checked out his flight team.

He was surprised who was sitting in the pilot's seat. Surprised, and a little frightened. "â€|Solana?" Garrus hesitated, he didn't believe it. He hadn't really checked the crew dossiers to see who was manning what stations aboard the ship, but seeing who would be flying him and his team around, he now wished he did.

The female Turian turned her head and her blue eye twinkled with what Garrus could only call "Oh yeah, its me"ness. "Welcome aboard the Citadel Special Forces Frigate _Albion_, C_ommander_." she winked. "And might I just say, the new title works well with you, brother."

Garrus couldn't believe it. He refused to believe it, females generally didn't serve any frontline rolls in the Turian Military, most were engineers and tech support specialists for maintenance on ships and ground vehicles. Solana herself was, last time Garrus heard from her and their father, part of the engineering corps on Palavan.

So why was she here as the Helmsman to a new stealth frigate?

"If we could make slugs fly as fast as your thoughts right now," Solana's voice drew Garrus from his thoughts. She was smirking, "We could sink whole ships in one shot. To answer the question you're probably wondering, I was picked out after my CO found me messing around with a flight simulator, my scores were high enough that he wanted to see me run the op again. Scored ever higher."

"That doesn't explain why you're aboard this ship," Garrus crossed his arms and frowned. He didn't mean to sound cold, but they were going into dangerous territory and he didn't want to have to worry about his little sister out there in the unforgiving Terminus systems.

"Well, _Commander_," her tone became frigid. "I was picked for this mission because not only can I fly circles in a fighter, I can pilot the big tubs too. And since I graduated with top honors from the Palavan Aerial Recon corps with a Red Star and five Blue Meteors, you should have a little faith in me." she turned away and sunk into her seat, looking a little more cross now. "So we clear to take off, Commander?"

Garrus frowned further, mandibles twitching in ire before he reigned himself in and nodded. "Yes, we're clear. Take us out."

Solana didn't verbally acknowledge the order as she gripped the controls and, in true Vakarian fashion, rolled her neck. "Taking us out." the ship around them thrummed, and the magnetic clamps holding them in place released. A shudder, then, Solana said. "And we're off."

The ship pushed out of the bay, and once it was in the open void, the four engines glowed brighter and the propulsion kicked them forward. Garrus barely caught himself as the acceleration staggered him. Somehow, he knew that was Solana getting her revenge on him and he glared at the back of her head.

She didn't even glance back at him.

"Easy there, Lieutenant," her co-pilot, a Salarian, warned her. "We're not trying to set any records here."

"No one likes a backseat flyer, Kulle," Solana replied, but eased on the speed anyways. "We are away, Commander, making for the Mass Relay." A pause, "Where we headed?"

"Purgatory," Garrus replied, he'd chat with his sister later. "A prison ship, We have to pick up our next crew member there."

"Oh~" Purred Solana. "Sounds exciting."

Garrus rolled his eyes. "If we're lucky, it will just be a simple job of get there, pay and leave with our Krogan."

Solana groaned and hung her head, turning to glare at him. "Spirits, brother! Why not just declare our universal invincibility while you're in the middle of jinxing us?"

"â€|Excuse me?" Garrus blinked, unsure what to make of that.

"She means you," The Salarian, Kulle, air quoted. "Jinxed us. When you said your statement in a way that makes it sound fool proof. She's insinuating that now, the mission will become far more complicated." a roll of his large eyes. "Superstition, I say."

"Pfft," Garrus shook his head. "Right, next you'll tell me Shatha can fly."

"â€|We're doomed." Solana stated flatly with a shake of her head.

* * *

><p>End of Chapter Twenty

Well there it is, Chapter Twenty. Leonardo still trying to catch TIM, and Garrus' own little mission is getting underway. And I altered some stuff, so, now we have Garrus' sis (Who's name I could not, for the life of me, find on the wiki, so per my pals suggestion Garrus' sis is named...Solana Vakarian!) I also lacked the patience to go through all those dialogue options with him in game to see if he says her name.

Also, had to do a bit of exposition there for the Valieri, which I felt I did horribly and was so forced, but, y'know, just getting that out of the wayâ€| might need to do some of those fun fangled Codex entries at the end of each chapter, or have chapters dedicated to them at intervals. Ah well.

Also, was finishing this the other day, but I was waiting to break that 670 review mark, but since I didn't and had this up, so, here it is!

**PS. So, I just read a review that told me it was "Vakarian" not "Vekarian" At first I was all "I know." then I went and reread it... turns out my Autocorrect was respelling it automatically to Vekarian... I feel so ashamed now that I couldn't spell my fav

character's name right. **

22. Chapter Twenty-One

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Twenty-One****

****February 7, 2581. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC Command Station **_**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 1100 Hours.**

>Leonardo walked through the line of ODS on display towards the Podium, where hundreds of reporters and hundreds more civilians stood in the crowds of the entirety of the Auditorium of the Atlas' command station. Cameras flashed, reporters asked their questions and he ignored them all in favor of keeping his purposefully grim stride towards that executioner's block.

He stepped up the first of the small stairway leading to the stage. The deployed snipers traced sightlines, checking for any element that could harm the Fleet Admiral. Their orders clear. Shoot to kill anyone who posed a threat. Leonardo didn't have time for mercy, this wasn't the time for mercy.

The Fleet admiral reached the podium and he waved a hand to dismiss his four ODS bodyguards.

They saluted and stepped off, taking their places at the four corners of the stage. Leonardo looked over the gathered masses and with a single gesture silenced the room. He waited until the last murmurs died before he closed his eyes.

Jack had sent him the intel. He had to, Jack Harper knew Leonardo couldn't resist the scent of thisâ€| _Damn you, Jack_. Leonardo thought to himself as he clenched his fists against the edges of the podium.

****Seven Hours Previous**

>"The encryption was hard, but I cracked it." Majestic said from his holo-pedestal to Leonardo, who was sitting and looking over the revealed files. "As per your orders, Iâ€| ahh, bypassed our Intelligence officers and brought the data directly to you."

"Very good, my friend," Leonardo said while offering the Smart AI a smile of gratitude before looking back at his screen. This data, he didn't trust any Intelligence Officer in the UNSC with. It had taken a full day for Majestic one of the most advanced Smart AIs to date, to crack it. And as files began to scroll across the screen Leonardo could see why.

Black Operations. Dating back all the way to the middle of the Insurrectionist days in the Outer Colonies of 2510s, detailing rather grisly operations conducted by ONI elements. Torture, assassinations, kidnapping, extortionâ€| all of these were fairly common things, Leonardo was aware. He'd read them all beforeâ€| but the operational targets? Personnel within the UNSC itself, along with several Outer Colony corporations.

Leonardo stared, eyes narrowing as he skimmed a few of the files. By

the end of one complete file he leaned back into his chair, eyes on the screen and face only slightly pale, but for a man who took pride in his ability to control it was a major sign of his shock. Older and recent filesâ€¦ all things hinted at ONI's corruption to a level he didn't dream to imagine.

Directors and certain arms manufacturers had urged the Insurrection on, lining their own pockets while using the Insurrection itself to give itself more operational freedom and budgets while selling information, ensuring that while the UNSC had the upper hand, it wouldn't crush the insurrection outrightâ€¦ and as the conflict prolonged arms sellers like Misriah had made killings selling military grade arms to the Insurrection, ammunition as well. The numbers he was seeing in front of him confirmed it all.

One of the most brutal insurrections in the history of mankind, no, the most brutal, had been funded by an element inside the UNSC itself, lining its pockets and using the war to dig its claws into everything it could. It prolonged the conflict to the point where the Covenant couldn't have shown up and they'd still likely be fighting those wars.

Leonardo grit his teeth, fury filling him like searing magma as he stood and slammed his fist onto the table with enough force to shake it. Leonardo hated it, he hated his own species as much as he loved it. He knew there could be good, that they could be worthy of upholding the Mantle of Responsibility and doing the Forerunners proud of their choice.

But even then, with peopleâ€¦ who cared only for the bottom line of some cheque or gaining some material items. How would humanity ever reach such a state? No, He needed to clean the slate, all of it. Every single greedy, cancerous element within his watch had to be eliminated.

ONI had to die.

Leonardo closed his eyes and whispered. "Very well."

****Present**

>The Fleet Admiral opened his eyes and relaxed his clenched fists. "Good people of the UNSC," he began, tone light and sombre as he stared back into the hundreds of faces that ate his words. "I have called you here today, and am talking to each and everyone one of you willing to listen to me across our vast territories in this beautifully dangerous universe." he swept his gaze over the crowd. "I wish I could tell you it was to announce some new miracle, a thing to celebrateâ€¦ but this is not. What I talk to you now is _corruption_."

* * *

><p>Epsilon Eridani System
****Spartan IV team Indigo

>**Operation: **_**BLACKOUT

>_"_Corruption_."

Indigo leader looked to her team, each member was dressed in civilian clothing and packing only a small, unfolding fire arm made to look

like a simple briefcase for hard documents. The announcement from Fleet Admiral Leonardo broadcast over the large screen of the Capital city's main square.

The codeword, Corruption, was spoken. Operation BLACKOUT was green to go.

Across the square, sat an UNSC official, sipping tea and chatting up a nice woman, laughing away while his four bodyguards stood around them, watching for threats. They failed, they hadn't noticed the five heavily trained Spartans in the same café.

"Operation is go." Indigo One whispered and nodded.

As one, the five of them stood from their places, knocking their chairs back and with a snap of their arms the weapons unfolded from their briefcases, revealing auto Machine-Pistols capable of firing 7.62x51mm ammunition, loaded with Hollow Points to prevent civilian casualties via over penetration. The bodyguards reached for their handguns in their coats.

Burps of gunfire echoed out before anyone else realized what had happened. The guards were down, and Indigo one held up her hand, shouting. "UNSC Spartans! Everyone get down now!" she rounded on the UNSC commander, who stood and was about to explode on her before she punched him across the jaw, breaking it easily. Before he could even crumple she grabbed his arm and wrenched him back towards her.

His shoulder popped in its socket and he cried out. "By order of Fleet Admiral Leonardo Petrov, you're under arrest for extortion, selling arms to Insurrectionists elements and subterfuge against the United Nation Space Command. Don't bother talking about lawyers, Commander Mikael, you won't live to see solid ground again." Indigo one hissed and punched him in the gut.

"Roll out the wheels, and tell the pilots to get to us, we have some trash to take out!" she barked.

Across the Eridani system, thirty-five other operations like this would be happening as well, corrupt UNSC officials, both ONI and standard Navy were ambushed, their defensive elements neutralized and they were taken off world to coordinates unknown. None had suspected their ambushes.

* * *

><p>Leonardo
His eyes hardened. "Greed and abuse of station! I am here to tell you that many things of the past have been rotted to the core because of these _diseases_" He clenched his fist, and the crowd could feel his focused anger. "The UNSC, Humanity, which I love with all my heart. Is being slowed by these elements. And now, I stand before you all to tell you that no longer! Hours ago. Intel retrieved from an operation have given us substantial proof of corruption in the outer colonies" he paused. Letting them digest his words. "And indeed" even here, in the inner colonies. On Earth itself, our homeworld."

In the crowd, a few people exchanged looks, nervous and confused.

"I am here to tell you, people of the Military who I proudly serve

with, and people of humanity, whom I gladly protect. That so long as I live, these elements, no matter where they hide will never escape my gaze." he glanced over the cameras, staring into them, letting the trillions of humans across the stars see the fire in them. "Nor shall they escape justice! Because of this corruption, the Insurrectionist movement before the great Covenant war grew to levels of threatening the government, those terrible brush fire wars." he stopped, letting the tension build.

"Those were manufactured by these elements." The bomb was dropped, and now reporters began to look nervous, but some asked the questions. He raised a hand, silencing them again. "You heard me. The greatest threat to our stability before the Covenant wereâ€¦ sadly, not entirely the fault of radicals, but our own people within the UNSCâ€¦ these people aided, pushed and prodded at the Innies, giving them reasons, arms and the drive to fight back and they all profited from it!" Leonardo slammed his fist onto the podium. "They traded the lives of our grandfathers, fathers and brothers and sisters for their own personnel gain!"

"Many are dead or retired, some yet carry on and now others take their place." Leonardo dropped his hands back to the sides of the podium. "And so, people of humanity. Where did this start? It started with an organization I'm sure you've whispered aboutâ€¦ The Office of Naval Intelligence. O. N and I." Leonardo emphasized. "They dug their roots deep during those wars, but now with the intel I have. I can kill this beast at its heart."

Leonardo frowned. "And now, I am glad to say that when Operation Blackout is complete, many of these elements will be cut out like the cancer they are. The Office of Naval Intelligence is also, as of this moment, disbanded, it's resources are seized and any and all of its operations are shut down until they are properly overseen to ensure they do not harm the people of whom we are supposed to protect."

"The ends do ****not**** justify the means as ONI believes." Leonardo stood straight. "The newest Intelligence network within the United Nations Space Command is now called United Nations InTelligence." UNIT. "Officials and information is, until the conclusion of Operation Blackout, is classified, I'm afraid. Just know that I have the highest hopes this organization will not repeat the mistakes of ONI." he turned and made to leave. "That is all, thank you. Everyone. For listening."

He walked off the stage and the people began to shout their questions, he ignored them and closed his eyes again, fighting off the building headache. He was a damned hypocrite. The ends didn't justify the means? Here he was using whatever means meant so as long he got what he wanted. He was in for a shitstorm, but before all thatâ€¦ he needed address someone else now. Privately.

* * *

><p>Excelus System, Terminus Space.
****CWS
Albion****, 12:00 Cycles. Commander Garrus Vakarian**.

>"Commander Vakarian," Solana relayed through Garrus' com, waking him from his "sniper trance" down in the range. "_We're five minutes out to Purgatory. And it is one ugly ship_."

"Can't be any uglier than that Krogan you took a fancy to three years back." Garrus grunted in turn, but didn't turn the com on for that. Instead he stood, folded up his rifle and replied more professionally. "Understood, Helmsman Vakarian."

Two Vakarians could be confusing, but thankfully Garrus had yet to hear a single snicker from his crew. He rolled his shoulders and looked over to the others in the range, a few crewmen who were off duty were taking off shots and others were working their gear.

He turned and made his way towards the elevator. His gut feelings were telling him this wasn't going to be an entirely peaceful trip, so instead of going alone he was going to take three members of his assigned team to help him retrieve the Krogan they wanted for his Specialist team.

He already had an idea of who wanted to take as well. He'd be taking Sparky with him as his Engineer, along with Saren and Fera. Mostly to assess Sparky and Fera's combat abilities, he didn't have to at least worry about Saren's since his combat record spoke volumes about his talent. But a personnel left on it by his brother, Former Commander Desolas Arterius warned that his brother could be brash.

Garrus would remember that as well to be safe.

The elevator, which to his immense pleasure, moved quicker up to the CIC and he stepped off onto the deck, raising a hand to silence one of the crew shouting he was an officer and he was on deck before proceeding along to the bridge. Once he got there, he looked down to Solana, then up out into the view window to see the ship they were visiting.

She was right. It was Spirits' damned ugly.

"Repurposed Krogan Heavy Dreadnought." Kulle said from his seat. "One of only three in existence since Krogan Rebellions. Size comparison makes it largest vessel in Council history, outmatching Destiny Ascension by a factor of two point five." he tilted his head. "Reading weapons. All disabled sides the forward planet buster."

Planet Busters, Krogan had created those monstrous vessels purely for war during the Rachni Wars, they could hold thousands of Krogan infantry, along with a contingent of vehicles, both light and heavy. They were armed to the brim with weaponry and the Planet Buster main guns were an insidious creation deemed necessary at the time. Using rail tech, the cannon fire high density metal shells with a nuclear explosive core that once striking a target, detonated with incredible force. The term Planet Buster came to be when the Krogan conquered Rachni worlds, too toxic for any species, they would bomb the planet from orbit for measure.

A brutal tactic. But that was the Krogan in general.

Combined with the Dreadnought's heavy armor, which could take blows from the Destiny Ascension's main gun, you had a floating fortress, thankfully, they were slow and didn't possess barriers. Which is what had lead to their defeat with superior Turian tactics in

space.

"We're being pinged, Commander." Solana informed him.

"Connect us." Garrus replied simply.

A moment then a flanging voice, Turian, came over the com.

"_Greetings, Commander Vakarian. I was told to expect you. I'm Warden Kyrille_."

"Commander Vakarian, pleased to meet you, Warden." Garrus lied. "So you have the Krogan ready?"

"_He's entirely prepped, I just need to confirm the payment's been transferred and you're free to take him._" A pause. "_Docking coordinates have been sent, I'll meet you aboard my ship. Until then, Commander_." the com clicked off.

"Oh yeah," Solana said when the com was off. "It's a trap."

"Have to agree." Kulle nodded.

"No doubt." Garrus agreed with a twitch of his mandibles. "Did you hear the way he said my name? Too pleasant, overly familiar. Like he was trying to cover up his real feelings for it."

"Mhm," Solana nodded and looked over at her elder brother. "Well, Commander. Have fun walking into the Shatha's birthing den, want me to assemble the entire team?"

"Just Saren, Sparky and Feran thank you." Garrus replied with a shake of his head.

"Bareface, Techy and Wingy." Solana nodded and keyed the com while Garrus made his way towards the airlock to wait for his team to assemble, to his surprise, when the airlock doors opened there stood Feran, spear in hand and tail swishing idly.

Garrus tried to hide the fact he jumped a little. "Feran." he greeted evenly despite the scare she gave him. "What are you doing here?"

"You wanted me on the mission." She replied flatly behind her mask, tilting her head slightly and again he felt that weight on his shoulders with her gaze, then it was gone. "You suspect a trap as well then?"

"Definitely." Garrus decided not to question what it was she did to know everything, he was almost tempted to call her some sort of mind reading psychic. "He knows my family name, and not in a friendly sort of way." the Commander paused. "Could be he just doesn't like me, but I'm not counting out a fight."

"Wise." Feran agreed, her grip on her staff tightening a bit. "The others are here."

True to her word, Saren and Sparky rounded the corner, the pair were talking about something as well. "Come on you stubborn bosh'tet, I'm not asking you to take down your shields, I'm asking you to allow me to install something on your shield pack!" Sparky hissed, holding up

a small black box in her palm, to which Saren glared at like it was the plague.

"I told you, no. You are not touching my armor," Saren growled. "I didn't let the techs touch my armor, nor the requisition officer. And I'm certainly not about to let you touch it, you spirits' damned suit ra-"

"Ahem." Garrus coughed pointedly, causing the pair to stop and turn to him mid argument. He rose a brow plate. "Do I need to turn the Advanced Stealth Frigate around you two?" he asked, trying not to sound so amused by the old bonded couple argument they seemed to be having just now.

"Sorry, Commander." Saren saluted quickly. "I was just trying to dissuade Engineer Lily-"

"Sparky!"

"Something or other, from trying to get at my shield pack before a likely dangerous mission." Saren went on as if he didn't hear her.

Garrus lowered his brow plate and looked to Sparky. "Explain?" he asked, deciding he may as well see what the fuss was about.

She turned to him and her glowing eyes were definitely excited. "Me and Dahl were working on this for awhile while we were bored in our cabin and got some components from the requisition officer and our travels!" she held up the black box she had been trying to persuade Saren to wear on his shield pack. "It interacts with the shielding system and provides an additional feature to our shielding units! It's, in theory, supposed to immediately produce a complete shield when the initial barriers go down. Normally, this sort of system is to much for the barrier computers to bear." she paused.

"Go on." Garrus was interested now.

"But this little black box? Using advanced VI to manipulate power from the armor and allows it without straining the own armors shield VI and risking prolonging the shield recharge period. It might take a bit more power from the armor to snap the second shield up right after the first breaks, but that's a small price for added protection a pinch right?"

"Note how she said 'In theory', Commander," Saren grunted from beside her, arms crossed. "For all we know it could burn out our shielding units and leave us entirely defenseless in the middle of a firefight."

"I have to agree with Sergeant Arterius there," Garrus nodded to his Turian subordinate. "Did you and Dahl test this stuff?"

"Oh yeah, we did, just now we want to put in full combat trials with other armor systems, and we thought this was a good time to see if one of you would like to try it out." she paused, "â€|Huh, thinking about it aloud it does sound overly dangerous."

"Just a bit," Garrus chuckled, liking her spirit. "Sorry, Sparky, but we're going to skip your combat trials, keep it on the ship, and get

ready to move out. We should be docking with the Purgatory soon and we're expecting a fight." he informed them.

Their postures tensed, and both nodded in acceptance.

They straightened themselves out and the ship shuddered slightly, signalling the docking ramp had magnetically attached itself to the Albion. It wasn't long before Solana stated they were good to move across the docking clamp. "Alright, Arterius, to my left, Sparky, my right." Garrus issued his orders. "Feran, bring up the rear."

Their replies were affirmatives and the airlock hissed opened after the two doors behind them were secured, immediately Garrus was greeted to the slightly stale stench of constantly recycled air. It was breathable, to be sure, but it still left an odd taste in his mouth. He took his first steps forward and his team moved along with him.

They crossed the docking tube and entered the main reception area. Garrus was unsurprised to find it guarded by several dozen armed mercenaries. The Blue and Black armor giving them away as Blue Suns, mostly Turians, a Batarian here and there, even an Elcor Heavy. Garrus took special note of him since said Elcor was armed with a Revenant Light-Machine Gun, that thing would tear their barriers down in moments and in the central kill zone they were currently standing inside of Garrus didn't feel a firefight was just in their favor yet.

Though he found himself hoping that maybe Feran and his gut were wrong and the warden really did just like him.

Garrus proceeded forward, keeping his strides casual and his posture relaxed. As a detective he'd had to walk into dangerous places while strutting like he belonged there before, though this was the first time he'd had to do with a team, but he felt they were casual enough. He dared a glance back.

He internally blanched. Saren was tense as a cadet during his first physical screening on Palavan, clearly wound up and prepped for a fight, but so obvious about it Garrus was half expecting the surrounding mercs to snicker. Sparky, for the most part lookedâ€| well, she was swaying her hips looking like an Asari dancer, Garrus had to admitâ€| she had swag. Feran walked with the calm grace he'd only ever seen her walk with, so he assumed she was well relaxed.

"Bad food paste, Arterius?" Garrus asked casually, glancing back at the Sergeant at the corner of his eye.

To his credit, Saren picked up on it immediately and his shoulders slumped with a sigh. "Sorry, Commander. Feel like the chef slipped me Grazik blood."

Garrus' wince was enough to let him know that he knew exactly what that was. Grazik's were small, multi-legged large insects known to Palavan, some people kept them as pets because they hunted other pests, Garrus himself had one in his youth, but their blood, when given to Turians, induced horrible, horrible diarrhoea.

He'd had the horrid luck to experience this in his youth as well when

some of his pet's blood dripped into his drink one day while he had been distractedâ€¦ needless to say his father had gotten rid of the thing and Garrus was never to own another.

Sad days.

"â€¦Too much information, Arterius," Garrus muttered. "Too much, anyways, try toâ€¦ keep it down, right?"

"Of course, Commander." Saren straightened his posture out and they proceeded along until they were met at the exit to the reception area by three more heavily armored escorts.

Krogan, they were notoriously tough and Garrus had once seen one take a hail of gunfire, laugh and then proceed to try and rush the twenty Special Response Team members while their guns cooled. Thankfully, Garrus had been on sniper duty then, and put a round above its brow, just below its crest. The "sweetspot", most thought it was the eye.

The eye, also had very thick bone behind it, able to slow a round enough possibly allow the Krogan to keep going. That, and Garrus didn't believe in taking easy shots.

Standing up to three Krogan, their armor colors matched and each had the head of a Varren with a Krogan "Crest" Knife in its jaws was printed on their left breast plate and right shoulder. Garrus wanted to blanch then and there. These weren't just your average Krogan mercs, they were part of the all Krogan mercenary company Thresher Killers. Unlike most Krogan mercs who relied entirely on their size and brutal tactics, TKs were smarter, well trained and almost each one was at their prime.

Garrus was now really hoping things didn't go bad.

"We're here to see the Warden concerning one of the prisoners," Garrus informed the leading Krogan, stepping forward. "I'm Commander Vakarian." He didn't offer his talons for a shake, the Krogan would probably crush his hand and rub it off as "don't know my own strength".

The leading Krogan peered at him through its dual glowing red eye visors of its helmet before raising his wrist and bellowing, "Warden, we've got the arrivals here, should I escort them to you?"

"Of course, Wreav." Warden Kyrille's voice came through the WristCom.

"Right," The Krogan, Wreav, nodded and addressed Garrus. "Come with us, but before you do, we're going to have to ask you to place any Level two and higher firearms in the deposit box over there." He gestured with a nod at the small opening in the wall. "It's standard procedure, we normally don't let any firearms on board past this point, but since you're on official business the Warden decided to allow you the comfort of your sidearms."

_Level two and higher? _Garrus' mandibles twitched in annoyed distress. Level two gear was essentially Sub-Machine Gun arms, anything larger that meant they'd only have their sidearms. And whatever little gear they could conceal.

"Commander!" Saren began to protest, but Garrus silenced him with a single raised talon.

"Disarm," Garrus grunted. He didn't like it, but the odds weren't in their favor here and disarming wouldn't add to that, but neither would a firefight with them standing between two dozen Blue Suns and three TK mercs. He'd play along for now.

And so, Saren grunted, placed his folded Widow in the deposit box. Sparky dropped her Avenger Assault Rifle in, and Feran collapsed her spear and dropped it in as well. Soon they had only their sidearms at their hips and they were moving along.

And halfway through the hallways, windows on both sides to showcase the hundreds of cells, along with all the worse inmates the Terminus and Citadel spaces had to offer. Turians, Elcor, a few Quarians, Krogans. It seemed every species found its way here.

"Impressive, ain't it?" Wreav chuckled at the head of their little group, glancing back at them. "We have about twenty thousand criminals here, all kept under lock and key until we say they can stretch their legs." He explained with a tint of pride. "That large number, kept in line by only three hundred employees. An army, kept in check by a platoon."

That was impressive, Garrus admitted. "Have there been escape attempts?" he asked.

"Escape? To where? Hard vacuum?" Wreav rumbled a laugh, shaking his head. "No, these dumbasses may be homicidal and inept at avoiding the law, but they're not so stupid to try and run in the middle of the void. Most we get are riots" and even then, few of those because of prison policy concerning them."

"That being?"

A shrug. "Any prisoner who starts a riot is free shooting, along with anyone else who so much as looks like they're rioting. Auto turrets, guards and my men get to tear into them." The Krogan chuckled. "Lots of fun, if you're into shooting pyjak's in a barrel."

"Isn't that against Council Prison protocols?" Garrus arched a brow plate, he of course wasn't interested in helping these prisoners, they were indeed scum and he'd shed no tears for the deaths of a few hundred of them, he was just curious.

"That's why we stay in the Terminus systems, no set laws here on the treatment of prisoners, it's how we keep order, these pyjak's think they're brutal, we break them down and show em nothing is more brutal than a Krogan who's been given permission to end their life." Wreav laughed. A sadistic sound.

"I almost pity them." Garrus said. He really didn't.

"Don't, they're all worthless, a few might make decent soldiers if their homicidal tendencies didn't make them about as trust worthy as what you Turians call barefaces."

Saren growled beside him and Garrus almost snickered at the barb.

"Alright, Warden's office is down that hallway," Wreav pointed down one of the adjoining hallways further into the station's second cellblock. "I need to get back to my rounds," he turned, "Come on you two, I heard Black Five was getting antsy, maybe some idiot will start something and kick off a free fire zone."

The three Krogan shared a laugh and lumbered off down another hall. Much to Garrus' relief.

"Let's go." Garrus said, moving along the appointed hallway and soon, he and his team came upon a pair of double doors. Above the doorway was listed as "Offices", he glanced back at his team and nodded. He stepped forward and the doors parted, revealing a wide, mostly empty room.

A few scattered seats, some shut down consoles and a few cameras. Two guards by the pair of doors across the room, along with another beside them. Those noted, he moved along with his team in tow until they reached the next set of doors. He spoke one of the guards, "The Warden is expecting us."

"Right," The guard nodded, turned to open the door. But Garrus saw the Turian's arm dip elsewhere once his back was turned, likely for his sidearm out of sight. The Turian quickly pulled his own sidearm and pressed it to the back of the guard's helmeted head while Sparky sprang forward and shoved an Omni-Blade into the neck of the second guard.

Two gunshots echoed out behind them.

"Next time, pack a sidearm." He heard Saren grumble.

"You had that under control." Feron said in turn, Garrus could hear a shrug in her tone.

Garrus reached over, turning the guard around and pressing the barrel of his pistol to the chin of the guard. "Where's the prisoner I'm after?" he growled, mandibles flaring.

"He's held in Cellblock five" The Turian replied, raising his hands. "Look, I was just following orders, yeah? No need to kill me, just grab my cuffs and you can go on your way blasting and running? Yeah?"

"Do you have access to Cellblock five?" Garrus asked now, pressing the barrel harder against his helmet.

"Yeah, just scan my Omni-Tool for the code-" Garrus blew his brains out across the wall. He turned to his team, "Grab their rifles." He ordered, "And get ready, the cameras had to have seen that."

"_We did indeed, Commander Vakarian_" A voice came over the intercom, Warden Kyrille's flanged voice. "_And with the death of that last guard, I can now flood the room with neurotoxin. I was hoping you'd just walk into the cell and I'd have my face to face with you while you were still breathing, but I guess sending your severed head to your father will be message enough_" a pause, the air vents in room began to hiss. "_Tell the Spirits I said hello_"

Garrus frowned, they hadn't packed their helmets. "Feran, can you place a biotic barrier to block the toxins?" he asked his comrade.

"Yes, air will be limited, I suggest we hurry with our escape. Get close." Feran replied, when they closed on her large frame, she placed her claws hands together and produced shining purple barrier, she nodded. They moved to the door, taking shallow breathes, except Sparky, who had a suit.

"Crack the door." Garrus ordered shortly.

"Cracking boss." Sparky got to work, bringing up her Omni-Tool. "Security is pinging my intrusionâ€ they're launching Counter Vis, Solaris Cybernetics Grade ones." She grumbled.

That was bad. "Is that bad?" Garrus asked, he wasn't a cyber specialist and hacking was above his grade.

"Childs play." Sparkly doubled her efforts. "Just time consuming." she mumbled.

"Time isn't our friend here," Saren double checked his Blue Suns issued Helstein rifle. "Hurry it up."

"You're welcome to help," Sparky grumped. A moment, then the fans began to reverse their pull. "There! Air is back, give it three seconds." she announced brightly. "I'll have the door open in a few shakes."

"Good," Garrus turned to Saren, "You have a threat charge?"

"Of course," Saren stepped up to the door and placed a circular disk onto it, he tapped it and it turned from a blinking red to glowing green. A soft ping echoed out, and Garrus' HUD display showed a team of seven people behind the door, all ready should it open.

Saren saw it too. "They're thorough."

"Sparky, can you kill the cameras in here?"

"Done."

"Good, when that door opens they're going to spray weapons fire through the doorway, I need you to activate the fire suppression systems." Garrus ordered.

"We're good, just give the word," Sparky gave a thumbs up.

Garrus nodded to the others, Feran took the center, curled her wings and engulfed her body with an biotic glow, hers fingers curled and she tensed her posture. Crouching slightly. Saren took right of the doorway, Garrus the left. "Do it."

Outside the door, there was a sharp series of hisses as the fire suppression systems activated, nozzles sprang from the walls and ceiling and began to spray grey, thickish foam, the guards, in their surprise, stepped back, some slipped while others tried to radio for someone to shut off the systems.

The door they were supposed to be watching hissed open with a snap and from the foaming hallway they watched as a winged beast flew forward, tackling the first two guards and lifting them by their necks, they flailed and their bones snapped when the beast applied crushing pressure.

Garrus and Saren slid, literally, due to the foam, they ran in, sliding along the floor and kicking the feet out from under two more guards, knocking them off balance, they slowed and fired, using the kick of their rifles to slow them to a stop as they poured rounds into the remaining three, who returned their own fire, but due to the foam, one slipped up and fired off haphazardly.

Killing the guard next to him, who slumped against the wall and slid down it, leaving a nice red streak of blood and brain matter. The third fell under Garrus' weapons fire. Sparky stepped out and put an extra round into the bodies, just to be safe. "I helped," she said when she joined them.

"Alright, lets move to cellblock Five. Sparky, can you compromise their security on the move?" Garrus turned and jogged along the hallway, careful not to slip until they reached an unfoamed part of it on their way to cellblock Five.

"With my Omni-tool? No, I'd need a security console to get anything useful done." Sparky replied, pausing to pick up a shotgun, she examined it and nodded. "I likey."

"What can you do then?"

"Trigger local settings, lockdowns, fire suppression methods, door locks." Sparky listed.

"Cell doors for the prisoners?" Garrus asked after a moment, he stopped and slid against the wall as two guards rounded the corner, weapons drawn and firing. Feran crouched and brought her hands up, the two glowed and with a flick of her arms, were flung into the glass so hard it cracked.

"Clear." Feran grunted, standing.

"I can," Sparky confirmed when they were on the move again. "You want me to unleash all the deadliest people in the galaxy from their cells?" she asked, raising a brow behind her visor. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"We're on the upper levels, lockdown access elevators to this primary hall section and then release the prisoners, it'll give the Warden something to deal with while we find our Krogan." Garrus replied, he and Saren raised their rifles, firing into another guard who was about to rush around the corner for cover in one of said elevators.

"Done, and!" Sparky frowned. "Done!"

Through the windows, they saw the cell doors part and allow the prisoners out, then turn and allow the next set of cells open, and the next. Criminals poured out into the lower decks, the dozen or so guards on hand were swarmed, their weapons taken. All hell broke loose below.

Klaxons blared and the intercom burst with orders from the Warden, commanding his guards to open fire and for the auto turrets to come online. Along with security mechs. "_Where the hell is Wreav?_" the Warden growled through the intercom.

"Hopefully being torn up if we're lucky," Saren grunted from beside him. Looking ahead, he shouted, "Incoming Halser!" he slid down, Garrus followed his lead and Sparky jumped to the side, pressing against the wall and Feran jumped, pumping her wings to allow the Halser Anti-Personnel missile to streak by and explode behind them.

The thing that fired it?

"Oh for Spirits' sakes!" Garrus rolled out of the way of the heavy auto cannon mounted on the left arm of the Heliat Arms Powered Assault Suit, or PAS. It lumbered in the center of the hall. "Powered armor!" he shouted.

"I think we got that!" Saren quipped, breaking professional protocol. "Disarm, he says! My Widow would have come in real-" he flinched when a heavy round chipped at the wall beside the small doorway he hid behind. "Spirits."

"Lodge a formal complaint!" Sparky ducked slightly into her down way, behind her was Feran, pressing herself to the doorway as tightly as she could. A pause when she lifted her Omni-Tool, she frowned. "It's got a CyNet! I need to get under its armor!"

Garrus grunted, the armored suit wasn't advancing, but the missile launcher on its left shoulder was almost done fabricating another missile. "Saren, we're going to draw its fire! Sparky, run forward when I give the signal! Feran, can you keep a barrier on Sparky for added protection?!"

"Yes," Feran nodded.

"Alright, Commander!" Saren gripped his rifle and took a breath, his mandible twitched in adrenaline fueled excitement.

"Covering fire!" Garrus turned the corner and opened fire with his Helstein, along with Saren, the mech stood there, letting the rounds they fired ping off its barriers as it raised its auto cannon. Sparky rushed forward, kicking off her Quarian legs for all they were worth. The armored suit targeted her, and she pressed forward, jumping over the first shot and mid flight, it fired, she waited for death.

The large round exploded a foot away from her as the Biotic barrier displeased the damage. She fell through the smoke and before the suit could turn its weapon back to her, having assumed her death, she leapt forward, grappling the shoulder and kicking off its armored knee as it swung for her with its three pronged free hand.

Up and over she went, like an Asari dancer, onto its back. She forged an Omni-Blade mid flip, and when she planted her feet on the back of its knees, she rammed the blade into its armor, creating a small hole in its cyber defenses. Immediately, her tool glowed, signalling a connection. "Yes!" she kicked off it the suit and slid back, moving her fingers as it turned to her.

It raised its auto cannon and a flanged voice rang out through its speakers. "Damned suit rat!"

"Bosh'tet plate head." Sparky snipped quietly as she tabbed a command on her Omni-Tool.

The PAS' shoulder mounted launcher detonated its explosive warheads cache, all of them. The suit stumbled left, its entire right side torso alight with fire. The voice in the speakers screamed in agony as she knew the Anti-Personnel incendiary ammo had gone off inside the suit, what they were seeing was nothing to the inferno now eating at the Turian inside it.

She didn't even feel a bit sorry for his screaming ass.

"PAS down." Sparky waved over the side of the flaming suit as it toppled and the screaming was silenced.

Garrus stepped forward, "Let's keep moving," He said, nodding to her. He had to admit, he was really, really impressed. Saren even eyed her with a newfound respect, only Feran appeared unphased by the display of acrobatic prowess.

They continued along.

By the time they reached Cellblock Five, the ship around them was a total mess, bodies of guards and prisoners alike littered the lower decks and a monotoned voice stated that Cellblock four and three had been vented of air to kill any rioters. Garrus couldn't focus on this, he had to find his Krogan or this will have all been for nothing.

When they reached Cellblock five, they were surprised to find that only a few cells were occupied, and the lights seemed to be off. "This isn't creepy." Garrus muttered, raising his rifle and activating its built in flash light, illuminating the darkened hallway.

The others did the same, except for Feran whose visor glinted and he had to assume her mask had built in vision modes. They proceeded along, and Garrus paused, seeing a doorway marked "Secured Items", he opened it and raised his rifle.

Inside were various weapons. Including the ones they'd placed in the deposit box. "Everyone, take your pick." Garrus ordered, nodding forward. They stepped inside, and he retrieved his Pheston, checking it over for tampering. He found none.

Saren grabbed his Widow, unfolded it and peered down the sight. He nodded, his weapon was fine. Sparky reached for her Kredak, but paused when she saw something most interesting. "Keelahâ€|" she mumbled, moving over to one of the cases.

Inside the cabinet was a Geth pulse rifle. An actual, and dare she sayâ€| She reached inside it, unfolded the weapon and placed the weapon's stock butt to her shoulder and linked it to her HUD. The targeting reticle popped up and its internal battery pinged at full charge. It did work!

"A geth rifle?" Garrus tilted his head. "Rare techâ€¦"

"And perfectly working," Sparky said, turning the team. "I'm taking this." she said, no one argued. She grabbed her Kredak as an afterthought.

Feran grabbed her spear and unfolded it, thudding the butt of it against the deck thrice to check if it was secure. The tip glinted with power. "Ready." she said.

"Lets move out, Sparky, try to get some lights up." Garrus said turning away.

There was a rustle of movement, and Saren raised his rifle and cursed in old Turian. Garrus spun around and saw Warden Kyrille drop out of cloak, one hand gripping Sparky's wrist and holding it across her chest, the other was pressing a pistol to the side of her head. The Warden had one popped eye that leaked blood, and some specks from explosive charring. He looked like hell spat him out.

"Ahh, Commander Vakarian," The Warden said darkly. "Glad we could meet face to face afterall, I knew you'd stay on mission, you're just like your Spirit's damned father." the Turian's trigger fingered tightened on the pistol slightly in anger. "Oh yes, now, put down your arms, and I'll consider letting her live."

"You think we're stupid?" Saren growled.

"No, but I know your Friend or Foe targeting won't let you shoot at me since I'm so close to your friend here." Kyrille replied. "Even with your precision rifle."

Saren didn't disagree, even now his scope read "Unable to fire due to Friendly Proximity", the trigger was locked. Garrus suffered the same problem, his HUD alerting him. Feran glared at the Turian over the Quararian's shoulder.

"Drop them! Or Garrus won't be the only one dying before this is over." Kyrille snarled, pressing the barrel of the pistol so hard to her head that she tilted it to the side. "Do it!"

Sparky considered, then when Garrus' shoulder slumped, she shared a look with Feran. Who peered back at herâ€¦ and then, her voice, inside her head spoke with soft comfort. _The Kredak at your hip, shoot his leg. I will protect you with a barrier_. Sparky blinked, but nodded, not going to question how she did that.

Her hand drifted to the Kredak at her hip, already unfolded. She wrapped her finger around the trigger and pointed it to the Warden's knee. She looked to Feran, who nodded. Sparky drew a breathâ€¦ and then she fired.

The Kredak, was a very vicious weapon, a shotgun small arm designed by Krogan's to fight Krognas, and such, their design had them firing razor sheared slips of rounds. Essentially shotgun handguns for Krogan, other races use them as primary weapons, very few possessing the strength to fire them one handed like the Krogan could.

So when that thing fired near point blank into the Warden's unshielded knee? It tore the limb clean off with a spray of shrapnel,

blood, skin and bone scattered with bits of soft and hard suit. The Warden screamed and pulled the trigger.

His shot pinged off a small glowing barrier at the side of her head, but the loud noise had her ear popping like no one's business. But that was irrelevant, she twisted around pressed the barrel of her Kredak to the Turian's chest and fired again. Blowing him back into the wall he'd been hiding against with a splatter of gore.

She winced. Her wrist was most definitely broken from the two shots one handed with the Kredak.

Garrus walked over, taking her shoulder. "You alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Sparky took a shaky breath, still a bit shaken from having a gun to her head. "A bit shaky, but beyond this?" she raised her hand, wincing at the spike of pain. "I'm good."

"Alright." Garrus stepped back, looking to Feran. "Good work."

The Valieri nodded in reply. And after Sparky was applied some medi-gel to dull the pain of her wrist until they could return to the Albion, they were moving along and finally, they'd arrived the cell they were looking for.

"Open it up." Garrus said.

The door hissed open and revealedâ€|

"Oh Spirits' sakesâ€|" Garrus muttered.

"Well, wellâ€|" A Krogan in basic prisoner slacks said, leaning forward with an amuse grin. "Garrus Vakarian. How's the jaw?"

"Wrexâ€|" Garrus mumbled, testing his jaw on instinct at the mention of it. "How's the scar?"

"Gotten me laid thrice." Wrex rumbled with a laugh, standing and moving forward until stood over the Turian, peering down at him. The others raised their weapons, side Feran, who watched impassively. "You the one who bought me?"

"Yeah," Garrus nodded, staring back at the Krogan. "You gonna be trouble?"

"For you? Maybe, for our enemies? Definitely." Wrex's lips curled into a predatory smirk. "Now shut up and give me a gun. I need to find Wreav and educate him on the art of betraying kin and forgetting not to space them afterwards."

"No time," Garrus shook his head. "The ship is falling apart and we need to leave, you're the objective and unarmored, I'd rather no lose you to a stray shot after going through all this to get to you."

"Touching," Wrex grumped and glanced over the others. "This the team?"

"Most, yeah." Garrus stepped back, looking to Sparky. "Give him your Kredak."

"Butâ€¦ ah, fineâ€¦" Spark held the weapon out with her good hand grip first. Wrex gladly accepted it.

"Ahh, A Kredak, four centuries since its creation and it's still racking up body counts," He admired the weapon, checking the sights. "Very nice." he looked to Garrus, "Well, how are we getting out then?"

"These cells air tight and able to be ejected into space?"

"Durr, It's a repurposed Krogan bunk shed, they're meant to be detached." Wrex replied, raising a brow. "Ohâ€¦ we're getting out that way?"

"Mhm." Garrus nodded, raising his hand to his com. "Solana, I need pick up from vacuum, we're about to get off the ship using one of the cells, I need you and the _Albion_ to pick us up."

"â€¦_Commander there is so much wrong with that sentence I wanna ask, but confirmed, just send a signal and I'll grab you_." a pause. "_Don't die, brother_." the com went out.

"We're notâ€¦?" Saren asked, but Garrus nodded, making the bareface slump his shoulders. "I hope your sister is a good pilot, Commander. Dying in space without air isn't my preferred method of death."

"Pussy." Wrex chuckled. "No shame in dying in the Void, Turian, it's the one foe you can't shoot with your guns."

"What about fear?" Sparky asked, rather curious.

"You shoot the person afraid." Wrex shrugged. "Goes well for about everything else too."

"â€¦Fair point."

"Enough chatter, load up int the cell, we're getting out of here." Garrus cut them off, and stepped into the cell Wrex had been sitting in. They followed suit, and the door closed again. Then, with a thump they were in the black.

Garrus sent the signal, and he sighed.

"So, A Quarian woman, one Krogan and two Turians were locked in a cellâ€¦" Sparky began, shaking her head. "I swear it sounds like a Fornax movie."

Wrex chuckled. "Funny thing, I think I saw it once."

Garrus groaned, "Sisâ€¦ please get here faster."

* * *

><p>February 7, 2581. Military Calendar.
****UNSC Command Station **_**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 1400 Hours.
>Leonardo stepped forward, staring down at his mentor, his

friend and once-superior officer. Lord Terrence Hood. "You knew," he said, accusation lacing his tone. "You knew everythingâ€¦"

Hood, to his credit, looked up and met his gaze unwaveringly, even when Leonardo had a M6H in hand. "Specifics?"

"Don't play coy!" Leonardo slammed his free hand onto the desk with sudden rage.

Hood didn't even flinch.

"You knew about the ONI operations from the years of 2537 all the way up to 56!" Leonardo stepped back and levelled his handgun at the older male's head, eyes narrowing. "You knew what they were doing, what they did and you didn't lift a _damned finger _to stop them!" he snarled. "The torture, the assassinations of our own officials. The support for the insurrectionists, you had to know these were things happening inside ONI and you still _let them_."

The old man stared back, eyes narrowing in turn. "What could have happened if I had tried to stop them?" he asked, arching his brow. "Parongosky ruled those times, ONI was her sword, shield and dagger. If I had moved against her, she could have removed me entirely. And with the Covenant threat very real I couldn't commit forces to internal corruption."

"That doesn't excuse anything!" Leonardo glared with fire, finger tightening on the trigger. "By God, civilians killed in bombings, our own killed in bombings as well, ships stolen, others destroyed. Infrastructure gone!" he glared. "And now you're sitting there telling me it was all justified because of the Covenant?"

"Yes." Hood closed his eyes. "It was wrong, hell, evil I'd go as far as to sayâ€¦ But Leonardo, I don't expect you to understand my choices. Back then, it was the Covenant, extinction. Today you can root out corruption because now the people have peace, no Covenant looming over them to glass their worlds. But in those times? It was always watching sensor screens waiting for Covenant signatures to pop up. Loss after loss. One glassed world after another."

"Hundreds of thousands died due to the innies, yes." Hood's eyes opened and he glared with enough fire to make Leonardo almost shocked. "But tens of billions died in the last five years of that war than the innies had ever committed since their first damned bombing. I've lived with my choices, if you want to damn me for doing what was the correct choice at the time, then get in line, _boy_. You and the countless dead have a long waiting time."

Leonardo glared and his eyes wavered, his lips set in a firm line and he lowered his handgun. "I'm sorry, Hoodâ€¦" he said, tone resigned. "But the ends don't justify the means, nor do they justify the turning of an eye from such evil." He stood back, and the door to Hood's office hissed open and two ODST's marched inside, aiming their MA6Ks at the older man. "Men, arrest this man. Take him to the brig with the othersâ€¦" Leonardo ordered quietly.

"Sir!" One moved forward.

Hood didn't resist, even as he was cuffed and roughly handled out of his office. He felt Leonardo's eyes on him the entire way out. When

the door closed, Leonardo grit his teeth and turned around, slamming his fist onto the desk with enough force to draw blood from the split skin of his knuckles. "Damnit!" He snarled. "Damn you!" he hissed, meaning Hood.

He slumped into a chair, letting his handgun stay atop the desk. He placed his hands on his head and growled between grit teeth. He'd just arrested his mentor, his role model, his idol. A man he'd come to believe was without flaw, with nothing but honor and strength.

Nowâ€¦ a fraud, a coward too afraid of confronting the corruption in his own ranks.

"Sir?" Majestic's voice came from the Holo-pad on the desk, Leonardo looked up to the concerned AI. "Are you going to be okay?"

Leonardo looked at his AI companion, his eyes wavered again and betrayal stabbed at his heart, but for the moment, he nodded. "Yes, Majesticâ€¦ just, getting over the shock of knowing a man I'd trustedâ€¦ treated like a father, was nothing short of a coward." He replied, sounding ruefully amused. "And I was a fool."

"Mhm," Majestic nodded slightly. "I'd pat your back, but an AI can't do that." he tried to humor the Fleet Admiral.

Leonardo's lips did twitch upwards a bit. "Well, it's the thought that counts, my friendâ€¦" he stood and holstered his sidearm. "Now, how are the reports?"

"Indigo, Sapphire, Ruby, Crimsonâ€¦" and so, Majestic reported that all fifty-two deployed Spartan IV teams called in and checked their statuses. Operation: BLACKOUT was a success. Today, Leonardo took a massive step in ensuring the UNSC remained the beacon of hope, unity and strength for Humanity and showed the people that corruption would not be tolerated.

There would be splinters left, of course. There always was. But they wouldn't last, not while Leonardo stood, while he breathed. He pressed his dress uniform and took a deep, calming breath and stared ahead as he left the office. He had to address the committee now, make them understand that this was the beginning of a new chapter in the UNSC's history.

"For Thy Mantle Upheldâ€¦" Leonardo whispered in comfort to himself as he proceeded through the suddenly lonely hallways of the station.

* * *

><p>End of chapter Twenty-One

There it is folks, lots of stuff happening and sorry this took so long to get out, but honestly with all the new games out, my muse dying off and on, and my addiction to Advanced Warfare (I'm sure you all saw hints of it during this chapter.), But I made the chapter extra long for you all as a small sorry, hope you enjoyed it as much as I did!

**As usual, any questions, concerns and etc etc, leave em in a Review

or PM and I shall get back to you!**

23. Chapter Twenty-Two

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Twenty-Two****

****Omega Nebula, Omega Station.**

>CWS **_**Albion**_**, Garrus Vakarian. 13:00
Cycles.****

"Spiritsâ€|" Solana whispered from her seat, hands temporarily frozen on the holographic control interface of the _Albion_.

Kulle, from his own seat, was just as shocked, albeit into silence. A rare thing for a Salarian.

Garrus was just getting over it in time to slip into a small amount of frustrated hesitation. "Solana, confirm we're dark." He spoke through the unnatural silence of the bridge. He received no reply. "Helmsman!" he barked.

Solana jumped and nodded, "Aye, Commander. Heat sinks are active and outer reflecting layers are operational. We're sensor and heat dark." She relayed as professionally as she could, Kulle snapped from his stupor as well. "Orders?"

"Keep us stationary," Garrus replied, continuing to look out the viewing window with narrowed eyes. "Can we get a secure link to the Council from our current position?"

"Sir?" Kulle glanced over at him, then shook his head. "Not secure, too many ships in orbit around Omega, always chance of detection." he explained. "Even tight beam encryption could be detected. If it is, they'd likely recognize the encryption style."

"Well, we have to do something to tell the Council what we're seeing." Garrus grunted, crossing his arms over his chest and never once tearing his eyes away from the view screen.

In Orbit around Omega, a station known for its criminality, were a number of craft. Mostly civilian issue ones carrying Dreadnought strength armor hull plating. Which was being welded by, according to brief sensor scans, hundreds of EVA workers. Omega, once a rundown looking piece of asteroid trash now looked more like a fortress.

That was the worst of it, no. The fact it had fifteen combat capable ships floating in patrol routes around it, each thing he'd noticed about them was the odd little orange and symbol freshly painted onto their hulls. It lookedâ€| like nothing Garrus had ever seen, it was orange and red. And every ship had the markings.

Along with Omega's hull, the shape stood out prominently against the newly added silver armored hull plating. It's declaration clear to all who would pass the station.

Aria T'Loak was looking to become something bigger than a queen of

pirates.

"Screenings complete," Kulle announced from his station. "Ship matches as follows. Three Asari Republics Theron-Cruiser class vessels." He paused, data scrolling across his console. "Outdated model, abandoned by the Republics navy forty years ago for Stellar class cruisers. Most were scrapped or sold to highest bidder collectors." he informed them. "Weaponry is standard issue point defense guns, Light-Cruiser forward Accelerator cannon and a two dozen disruptor torpedo tubes along port and starboard sides."

"Seven Turian Hierarchy Classao-Class Frigates, Smaller craft, built for speed, unique combat style has the craft sporting two forward cannons and four dozen Disruptor torpedo bays." Kulle tilted his head. "Not much in the way of small craft defense. Scrapped model. Very easy to come by in the Terminus."

"I don't recognize the last three designs." Kulle reported, frowning. "Doesn't match any known Citadel databases."

"Could they be Human?" Solana asked.

"No, reviewed battle footage from Falcus, no ships in footage match these designs," Kulle replied with a shake of his head. "Though, design structure matches design values of Humanity's allies, named Sangheili."

"Spiritsâ€|" Solana face palmed. "That means those small Frigates have plasma weaponry, right? Isn't that way the dossier said? These Sangheili rely on high density plasma projectiles?"

"Indeed, just one of those rounds could melt through us. Armor meant to absorb and dissipate high velocity impacts, not super heated plasma." Kulle nodded. "Kinetic barriers also useless, no solid mass to deflect."

Garrus wanted to growl, but he resisted that urge and simply let his mandibles twitch in annoyance. They'd just arrived and already their mission seemed like a total bust. He couldn't inform the council at this distance, nor could he just turn tail and leave just like that, leaving this rabid Shatha's den of criminal scum unwatched. There had to be a way to go about this, they needed intel and all they'd know was on that station.

"Uh, Commander. We're being pinged on the Tight-Beam." Solana informed him to his and Kulle's surprise.

"Is it coming from the fleet?" Garrus ventured, getting ready to order her into full drive and getting them to the relay.

"No, it's on the tight beam." A pause, "Signature doesn't match Council frequencies. But it's offering a handshake connection protocol." she explained.

Garrus considered it for all of a second. "Accept it."

"Done, you're on, Commander."

"This is Commander Vakarian of the CWS Albion," Garrus spoke out,

knowing the com line was on. "To whom am I speaking?"

"_Commander_," A distinct, deep rumble of a voice came back over the com, surprising them all. "_I am Ship Master Vter Nar' Harumai, currently commanding the Sangheili Empire's SpecOps Stealth Frigate _Disconcerting Silence._" There was pause. "_I see you're no ally of these pirate scum. So I'm extending a hand in cooperation if our goals coincide_."

"Pirate scum?" Garrus arched a brow. "You mean Aria T'Loak?"

"_No, she is of no concern to our mission out here_." Vter replied dismissively. "_Our concern is the three vessels you've likely noticed within that fleet, the Sangheili Empire Frigates, outdated as they are, they are home to a series of High Profile individuals who's heads I've been ordered to bring back to my Supreme Commander_." He explained to them. "_They are currently selling their arms and ships to the one you called Aria T'Loak, in exchange for a place to hide their cowardly selves from the wrath of the Arbiter_."

Garrus was surprised by how dramatically these Sangheili spoke, and the reverence in which he spoke of this "Arbiter" was also surprising, he guessed the Arbiter was either some very high Military rank or a deity of justice. "So where do we come in then?"

"_You are no allies of them, and loathe as I am to admit it, even my own team will not be able to get aboard that station without some local help. Your cultures and species are unknown to us, and it would bring shame upon my name to seek the actions of an entire fleet to bring these three scum to justice._" Vter explained with a low growl. "_And since you've been reconnoitring them for the last ten miner cycles. I assume you too seek a target_?"

Garrus had to admit, he was tempted to say they were after more but the way that the Sangheili Ship Master, he guessed that was a Captain? Spoke left him with the impression that this individual was a very forward one. "We're currently after a High Value target of our own, we've received word that there could be possible rogue human elements on that station assisting Aria T'Loak in various clandestine activities."

A thoughtful rumble echoed through the com. "Rogue human elements? Interesting objective, but I see our prey likely lies in the middle of that station. So, I propose a truce then, we will aid you, and you will aid us." A pause. "Do we have a deal?"

"I don't like making deals without knowing what my partner is planning," Garrus replied, arching a brow plate. "How do I know I can trust you?"

A small grunt of indignation. "_The same can be said to you. I do not like your Council, or your methods for running a large multi-species organization, it reminds me too much of the San 'Shyuum's accursed rule over us in the Covenant. But you Turians, I read from intelligence reports that you believe in the values of, the Humans would say, getting the job done_?"

Garrus had to admit, he had his species pretty much pegged there. "Fair enough, alright. Since you're contacting me, I assume you have a plan in place?"

"_Yes, my sensors have pinpointed roughly two hundred and eleven operators in the black of Space currently welding the hull pieces onto the station's main body._" Vter replied. "_You've members of your of the same races of these workers correct? If so, my plan is we assume to be one of there own. You slip in under the guise of an ally while me and my team shadows you inside_."

"Shadow us? Won't you need disguises as well?" Garrus arched a brow plate.

A humoured chuckle. "_You shall see. I am send you my teams com frequency. The operation will begin in twenty micro cycles_." Another pause. "_I look forward to working with you, Turian Commander Vakarian_."

And the signal was out.

Solana immediately spoke. "This sounds like a bad idea." She turned her head to peer at him over her shoulder. "You agree, right? Please tell me you agree."

"Absolutely," Garrus nodded, but turned. "Assemble the team in the briefing room, Helmsman. I have a bad idea to give life to!" he called back to as he marched down the CIC. Much to Solana's eye rolling chagrin.

"Aye, Commander." Solana turned back to her console, sighing. "I swear, he's trying to make me worry!" she grumped, and turned on the com systems. "Attention, all members of the Specialist team, report to the briefing room. Commander's orders."

That said, she leaned back and sighed. Kulle spoke to her, "Worry not, your brother proves himself capable. In fact seems at home in these environments."

"Yeah," Solana closed her eyes. "That's what worries me."

* * *

><p>February 8, 2581. Military Calendar.
****UNSC Command Station **_**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 0700 Hours.
>"I can't kill you," Leonardo said from across the desk that he and his mentor sat opposite to each other now.

Where they had been sitting for the better part of two minutes in nothing but silence until just now. Leonardo glared balefully at the older man.

"Forerunners know I want to, Hood. But you're a hero to the people, as exposed for the coward you were back then, you've still enough pull and public opinion to rival me in the UNSC and general populace that killing you would damage my image." he placed his elbows atop the table and leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "And much as I loathe myself to admit it, you're dependable."

Hood took the verbal beating in stride. It was expected, at his age you didn't get riled by only the most severe of language knives and he'd known his protÃ©gÃ© would be more than a little sore over the discovery of such things from him. Terrence had hoped that such

things would never have been found out by the young Fleet Admiral, and if they had been, from Hood himself. But they hadn't, Leonardo had found out from a man they'd been hunting that the man who's hand was placed upon his shoulder so many years ago in the Officer's Training program had allowed such to happen.

Hood stood by what he said of course, at the time he'd done all he could with what he had at his disposal. The Covenant had been a threat too great to split his attention between Insurrectionist pockets, Covenant invasions and ONI corruption. They'd barely fought two fronts, a third would have ended the UNSC and by extension, Humanity.

He didn't expect Leonardo to understand that. Hell it was Hood's partial fault for that, he'd spent the last fifteen years grooming the kid into an Admiral of today. He'd seen what the young man could do back then, saw the raw talent and drive in those eyes and like Parangosky took on Serin Osmin as her apprentice, Hood had taken on Leonardo.

Along the way, they'd turned from Mentor and Apprentice to friends and then a semblance of Father and son. And now, looking into the young Fleet Admiral's eyes, Hood saw that accusing hurt still there, buried beneath the sharp anger his apprentice had chosen to mask it with.

"So, you've still got a use for me then?" Hood asked, not bothering to ask what it was since Leonardo would reveal it shortly.

"Indeed," Leonardo closed his eyes. "While the others who have been found guilty of the crimes within ONI are being executed, others imprisoned. Their families are also being compensated, though I imagine we'll have a few angry spouses, sons and daughters running off to join the Insurrection for this anyways."

"Likely," Hood said shortly. He knew this was a coping method for Leonardo, the young man lived for probability and assessment. Where others would likely find the task tedious or unnecessary, he knew the Fleet Admiral took a strange comfort in it.

"As for the work I have in mind for you," Leonardo's eyes opened again and he stared through Hood. "UNIT still needs a few select individuals for its upper echelons of commanding officers, particular a second in Command. You won't be an Admiral anymore, instead you're being demoted to First Lieutenant."

"Fair enough," Hood nodded and leaned forward as well, curious. "Who'll be running this UNIT of yours then? I imagine the choices were difficult."

"Not as much as you'd think," Leonardo replied tersely. "And I'm glad you asked, she should be here any moment now, as I've asked her away from her own duties down in the Zeta Doradus system." He glanced at the door, "I believe you two are already acquainted?"

The door hissed open and Hood's eyes narrowed. "Catherine," he mumbled, staring the young brunette who sauntered into the room, her uniform pressed and proper with the bars of a navy Captain adorning her shoulder and chest. "Itâ€| can't beâ€|"

"It is," Leonardo said, raising an eyebrow at his mentor. "You look like you've seen a ghost, Hood."

"Who is she?"

Leonardo's smile turned ruefully amused. "Officially? She is Catherine Michealis, Captain of the UNSC Navy, born on Eridanus II in the year of twenty-five fifty-nine. Enlisted with the Earth recruiting station. Parents, deceased." a pause, "To ONI, she was Subject designation one five seven two and four." he glanced at the young woman. "A clone of the great Doctor Catherine Halsey."

"You say that with such disdain," Catherine said, shaking her head and looking at Lord Hood. He almost gasped at the way her eyes observed him—it was exactly like the woman he'd watched die shortly after the Didact war. "Lord Terrence Hood, it's a pleasure." she stepped forward and offered her hand.

He looked at her, then at her offered limb. Finally, he lifted his hand and shakily took hers, gave a firm but quick shake and pulled back when she smiled in amusement. She even sounded like Halsey! He turned to Leonardo. "When did you find her?"

"ONI had a number like her across their ranks working various occupations. Surprisingly, each one had a "custom" family of sorts, who, in exchange for good credits and loyalty, raised these clones in various worlds and for certain occupations." Leonardo explained, gesturing to the young woman. "Catherine here was studying to be a geneticist when her adopted family were killed in an Insurrectionist bombing twelve years ago. From there, with the fire of her late mother, shall we say—"

"I wanted to take the fight to them." Catherine interjected, giving Leonardo a scathing look that, to Hood's great amusement, actually gave his own fiery apprentice pause. "So I joined up with the UNSC before the ONI watchers could properly intervene, by then, the only way they could me and themselves a secret was to either have me killed, or allow my DNA scans to go through and get flagged. They quickly got me accepted." she pulled another chair and saw between the two men. "From there, I was accepted into Officer's training for my sharp mind and charming wit."

"Served aboard the Frigate _Mermaid's Trident_ out in the re-established Outer Colonies for the better part of my career as a Weapon stations operator, eventually to First Lieutenant and serving as its second in command. Then two years ago I was pulled back and assigned Security overseer of the Zeta Doradus system." she sniffed derisively. "A boring assignment."

"What about the other clones for this project? Where are they? And how did you," Hood looked to Leonardo. "Know about her?"

"She served briefly aboard my ship before assigned to the _Mermaid's Trident_," Leonardo explained. "It was there I got to know her, at the time I didn't think much of her outside of her extremely sharp mind, our chess games were—well, we've still yet to settle our tie at two for two." he chuckled, glancing at the woman in question before back to Hood. "Then, when Baige team indicated what they'd found on their ONI hunt, it lead me to her, and the other clones."

"My sisters," Catherine interjected again. "Are still across UNSC space, mostly under scientific occupations, apparently ONI wanted another, more tame Doctor Halsey in their ranks and we were being watched, our results, awards, communications, all monitored to find the best candidate to live up to the great Doctor Catherine Halsey of the past." She explained, shaking her head. "For purposes being withheld, I've suggested that we bring them all in and, well, explain their circumstances."

"You take this rather well," Hood stated, arching a brow. "Doesn't being a clone bother you?"

"Should it really?" She asked, arching her own slender brow. "Should I wake in a cold sweat every morning, feeling dread that I will sleep one day and wake up with the memories of the woman who I was supposed to replace?" She gave an amused smile. "Should I feel like I'm just a shadow of her? Created merely to serve as she did? Honestly, Hood. I sleep, I dream, I strive for goals. Clone or not, I'm just as human as you and Leonardo."

Hood couldn't believe it. She even spoke with that same mocking wit that Halsey did! He was staring at the memory long since buried and honestly, it was leaving him with mixed feelings. "So, you'll be Commanding this new UNIT then?"

Leonardo then stood from his chair and looked at them. "Alright, you two can get better acquainted elsewhere. I was just here to inform First Lieutenant Hood of his position, Captain," he bowed his head to her. "You have the floor get him up to speed." he turned and left briskly.

Alone with the ghost, Hood turned his gaze back onto the dark haired woman, who slid into the seat where Leonardo once sat. "Now, I'm sure you've got a lot more questions then just about UNIT, so I'll tell you now. Don't ask, I don't much care for what I am and all that, I'm a Navy Captain, a damn good one. Not a scientist. Now, come on." she stood and gestured him up. "Let's walk and talk. I need some coffee."

Hood could only shake his head and standing. A smile tugging at his lips. "My god." he whispered to himself as he followed after his now superior officer. People saluted to them both as they entered the halls of the Atlas, for awhile they was silence.

"You'll be pleased to know that despite the loss of rank, within UNIT you'll have, probably just as much leeway in the military as you did in your position as Rear Admiral," Catherine explained to him as they walked. "United Nations INtelligence, is like ONI before it, dedicated to the advancement of the UNSC and Humanity in general. However, unlike our now hunted predecessors we report directly to the Committee."

Hood blinked. "We report to the entirety of the Committee? Civilian side included?"

Catherine looked over her shoulder at him so he could see the roll of her eyes. "Heaven's no. That's just what's on the pen and paper, we're mostly reporting directly to Leonardo himself, the Committee just gets the benefit of being able to see our operation reports,

some additional data. All censored for security reasons of course."

"Censoredâ€|" Hood frowned and moved to match her pace. "So, really only Leonardo gets full access to this outfit?"

She shrugged, stopping at an elevator and tapping the key to summon one. "Essentially. Hood, I won't lie to you and I will be brutally honest, so I expect the same from you." She looked at him, "UNIT is more or less Leonardo's personnel Intelligence and Special operations outfit. He gets us the funding, toys and personnel that we ask for, and in return we give him the results he wants."

The elevator doors opened and the pair stepped inside. Alone in the otherwise generous space, Hood's mind worked over the woman's words. He'd just told that they were Leonardo's personnel team of Specialists, the way she worded it justâ€| no, she outright told him that Leonardo alone would decide where they'd spend their focus. They were a private unit rather than one under the general command of the UNSC. He closed his eyes and sighed explosively at the implications, that just wasn't right. No one, not even Leonardo should be the only one who had total command of a Intelligence unit, even if it was his brainchild.

"I can almost hear those thoughts of yours, Lieutenant." Catherine's amused voice brought him from his brooding. "And I know how it sounds, but honestly, is it so bad? You of all people know he's on the money. He's got honor, he's sharp and he knows how to get things done without letting politics get in the way of his thinking. You've seen it yourself." She turned to him now, "ONI. A force even you wouldn't touch, he torched it. All of it to the ground, he had intel on these operations. Operations you already knew about, sat on your thumbs for decades. He gets them and within three days has knocked their door down and cleaned house."

She went on. "And if he hadn't found out about you knowing them, you'd be commanding me inside UNIT," when she saw Hood's brows raise, she smirked. "Yeah, my job? Was supposed to be yours and I was to be your right hand. But he made a last minute alterationâ€| for obvious reasons."

"He wanted me to lead UNIT?"

"Why not? At the point the started putting all this together you were the single most person in the UNSC he trusted. Who better to entrust a new Intelligence branch to than the one you can call mentor?" she asked pointedly.

Hood stared at her before he closed his aged eyes and gave another sigh. "He never told me anything about UNIT." he mumbled.

"It was going to be a surprise, he told me you might enjoy a little more active behind the desk work than just paperwork day in and day out, since you seemed so restless once you stepped down as Fleet Admiral," she explained, "Look. Things are grey between you two now, I get that. But the fact you're not in prison, Court-martialled or facing the firing squad is proof that he still believes in you."

Hood raised his eyes to hers and he blinked in genuine surprise.

"Youâ€| seem to know a lot about him, how long did you two serve together?"

"Four months. But we've kept contact for the last several years as Chess buddies," Catherine explained, glancing sideways a bit in a way that Hood had once seen Halsey do once when in the presence of a younger Captain Keyes.

He saw the embarrassment in her eyes and he knew, then and there that this woman was almost a perfect clone of Halsey, she didn't have the memories, but the sharpness of mind and tendencies were impeccable.

He now also knew she had a bit of a fire for his former apprentice.

"I see," he said, trying not to sound amused at the idea. It wouldn't do to possibly offend his commanding officer so close after being assigned, now would it? He also had to keep from grinning when she turned and marched out of the elevator. He followed after her with a new spring in his step.

And for once in the last thirty years he felt just a few decades younger again. He'd worry about being assigned to a unit that was essentially Leonardo's personnel battalion later when he was more settled.

* * *

><p>Omega Nebula, Omega Station.
****CWS **_**Albion**_**, Garrus Vakarian. 13:25 Cycles.

>"_Commander_," Solana's voice came through his helmet's coms. "_Let me just say again that this is a horrible idea and that if you get killed I'm going to drag your body back to father and help him kick it._"

"Noted, Helmsman." Garrus couldn't but be amused at his sister's worrying. "Now, keep the channel clear and inform us of any changes in the patrol routes of the orbiting ships. We can't risk being seen if this is going to work."

A sigh. "_Aye, Commander_."

The line went out.

Garrus, along with Saren, Sparky, Wrex and Dahl. All in full EVA stable armor with small micro thrusters and Mag-Boots. Moving through the darkness of space away from the Albion and towards the orbiting fleet of ships that apparently belonged to Aria T'Loak now. The thought of that Asari making her own private army was very disconcerting, enough so that he'd agreed to work with the Sangheili Ship Master just for the chance to see what was happening inside the station and get some intel back to the Council.

And as they approached one of the many floating pieces of asteroid debris from the initial mining rock that had been the mining stations original purpose, he tried to spot the Sangheili team that would be helping him slip into the station.

He couldn't spot them. Had they been compromised already?

His com blinked on with the Tight Beam transmission. "_Commander Vakarian, good to see you've made good time_."

With those words, the rendezvous point suddenly had five more large, black armored figures standing atop it. Crouched against the rock and peering at the team from blood red visors.

When Garrus and his team touched down onto the rock, he looked at the five Sangheili. And he had to say they were spirits blessed huge! Standing easily on par with Wrex in full armor, their limbs were slim, their legs double jointed and blackness of their armor was decorated with various etchings that appeared to be both painted and scratched onto the armor itself.

One was wearing a golden band on left arm and he assumed that was Vter. "Ship Master?" Garrus questioned the gold branded Sangheili.

The male rumbled a laugh behind his full helmet and nodded. "Correct, Commander." he lifted one of his hands and pointed at the station that spun into view, "Our prey awaits. Have you gotten the ones you wanted to replace?"

"Yes, we've found some workers who match our species, we just need their access codes from their Omni-Tools, that should get us through the airlock and keep questions from being raised." Garrus replied. "Are you sure you can retrieve the targets without being seen?"

"Our Active Camouflage will not fail us," Vter nodded to his team. "Now, we must get closer. Stay in the shadows of the debris and keep your boosters set to low burn, we do not wish for their heat sensors to detect us." that said, Vter and his team cloaked again, and their flickering forms moved along the rock to get a better angle to move towards the fleet.

Garrus looked to his team. "Remember, tight beam coms only, anything else and they could pick up the signals. If this goes south it's us and two small ships against a fleet of them." he paused, "So, not good odds. No pressure." he turned and followed after the Sangheili.

Wrex grunted from his place. "No pressure my ass." he followed after the Commander.

Soon the rest of them did as well until they got to the right angle. Seeing the five Sangheili Commandos burst along with back mounted thrusters, Garrus and his team followed suit after them. For ten minutes this was the routine, burst, land, angle, rinse and repeat.

They just finished moving across the shadow of one of the closer vessels to the station and Garrus could feel his mandibles twitching in anticipation for the possible breaking of their cover when nothing happened, he almost sighed in relief and landed atop the final rock until they reached the station.

He saw the various workers now, moving about their EVA suits welding sections of the new hull into place. It was pretty efficient for a bunch of criminal scum, he'd admit. His eyes scanned the various

gatherings and workers, finally, "Sparky, can you get their coms?"

"On it," Sparky crouched and dull her Omni-Tool light to minimum exposure, so it was more a flat orange block than bright spotting tool. "Got em."

Soon enough, Garrus could hear the chatter from the station. "_Group B here, we've finished welding our section and we're down to our last ten minutes of air, we're coming back to the airlock._" A pause. "_I'm looking forward to some drinks._"

Garrus sighted through his Pheaston's scope, looking for the group in question. "_Found them! _"Vter, tagging some workers moving along for the airlock. That's our group." he said.

The Sangheili looked along, the data appearing on his HUD. "I see them, Commander." A pause, "My men will get them. Wait here." The Sangheili's thrusters burned brightly once and all five moved along, cloaking mid flight as they moved to intercept the small team.

Said team even had a Krogan! How convenient.

He pulled his Krysaë Rifle from his back and zoomed into the scope, watching as the group of welders moved along— only for them to suddenly stop, and he watched as heads were wrenched to the side and their bodies falling limp. Making the Turian shudder. That was some crazy strength the Sangheili had.

Soon enough, the bodies were soon floating their way just as quickly. Once the Sangheili returned, Sparky and Dahl got to work scanning the Omni-tools and copying the ID coding inside them. That done, each of them received their own, all except the Sangheili themselves. Garrus then looked at the bodies. "We can't just leave them here." he said to Vter. "They'll be spotted."

"A fair point." Vter looked down at the bodies, waving his team to the bodies, the four Sangheili knelt at them, pulling cylindrical devices and planting them into the rock, then, a field of light bending beams connected and soon the bodies were gone, leaving just the barest hint of flickering images.

"—I don't suppose I can have a look at those, can I?" Dahl asked from beside Sparky. "Because that tech is seriously cool."

Vter grunted in amusement. "No, you may not. Now come, I'm eager to find those accursed souls and bring their heads back to my Supreme Commander."

"—Their actual heads?" Garrus asked now, before he thought that Vter was just being metaphorical but the way the Sangheili spoke about it in person made him question if the Special Operations Sangheili was actually serious.

No, he couldn't be—

"What better way to prove they are indeed dead?" Vter replied simply, glancing at him. "I'd take their entire carcass, but that'd draw too much attention." he added as an afterthought.

As if that made alright!

Garrus stared. "â€|Right," he said uncomfortably, a little weary of the Sangheili now knowing that their species, when setting hunters after their own kind, quite literally beheaded them as proof of the kill.

Wrex on the other hand, chuckled. "I like your methods, Sangheili. Nothing like dumping the severed head of your foes on the desk of your superior and asking where the reward is."

Vter didn't acknowledge them before they were settled, once they were. Garrus' team and the Sangheili all moved for the airlock, touching down on the station's hull and moving along with Mag-Boots. All the way Garrus could tell the Sangheili were shadowing them as Vter said they would.

Once they reached the airlock, Garrus tapped the key and held up his Omni-Tool. Moment of truth. It scanned, blinked once, twice, then the lock turned green. He nodded to his team and they shuffled inside, followed by their Sangheili allies. Inside the airlock was a bit of a tight fit, but soon, the doors closed behind them. A brief hiss to signal pressurization then the inner doors parted.

Revealing a hallway, leaving out into a storage warehouse of some kind. Along the walls were catwalks, stairways to two other levels. Various tools and crates around containing fuel for the welding tools, spare air canisters and artificial gravity awaited them.

"Nice and steady, no cameras." Garrus informed the others. They kept their helmets on and moved along the hallway, once they entered the main warehouse area he saw Batarians, Turians and other species moving crates around, refilling welder tanks and loading up trolleys of armor plating and insulating plates.

Garrus was tempted to mark them for later so they could possibly blow the storage area up, taking those plates out and setting Aria T'Loak slightly back in her fortifying the station. But for now, they had to stay on mission. "Nice and easy, people." he warned, moving along. They kept their helmets on, except Dahl and Sparky, who were Quarians and always in suits.

They moved through, few people in present gave them looks, hardly paying them mind and that was perfectly fine with Garrus since he didn't want to risk being found out because they chose a group who just happened to know someone inside the warehouse. And, to Garrus' great relief they were out of the warehouse and out onto the musty, likely criminal ridden streets of Omega's middle levels.

What he saw surprised him.

He'd seen vids of Omega prior. It was always described and seen as a place where the air smelled of rust and decay, stale from filtering and poor maintenance. Dirtied streets littered with the homeless and junkies and every other thing under the rock. Violence around every corner and not a lawly figure in sight.

What he was seeing was a well lit, only slightly dirty street with various people moving to and fro places, couples here and there, but

mostly groups and singles looking at their Omni tools or just moving with a carefree purpose. The air, while still slightly smokey, wasn't so misted and obscured the other side of the station as he'd been lead to believe.

He saw several armored Batarians and Turians moving along, rifles unfolded and held in relaxed positions, moving in orderly fashions along the street with the same crest painted onto their chest and shoulders. Aria's crest.

This wasn't a criminal filled Omega, this was an Omega being refitted to be the capital of one ambitious Asari, this was going to be the Capital from which Aria would command her forces from.

This was her first move into something Garrus couldn't begin imagine in scope.

"Keelah," Sparky whispered. "This place has changed."

"Yeahâ€|" Dahl agreed with a nod. "It hasâ€|" he glanced around in wonder.

"Huh," Wrex grunted, crossing his arms over his chest looking around. "Not two years ago this place was a mercs paradise, armed patrols? Orbiting fleet? Armor plating and defensive guns?" he sniffed. "She's making an armyâ€|"

"No kidding?" Saren replied, glancing at the Krogan. "We need to tell the Council, if there was doubts of that beforeâ€| I think we need to dispel them now." he crossed his arms. "But before that, we need to find this human."

As if from the heavens, or rather, the intercom system.

"_Attention, Attention all citizens of Omega. Those still seeking to remain on the station are the report to the immigration offices on level four, five and six. Any questions will have to wait until there_." The voice was female, though they couldn't tell if it was human. "_As well, all those currently signed residents of Omega seeking to enlist with the Omega Armed Forces, please report to the recruiting station at Afterlife and speak to Sergeant Jacob Taylor, he's human so you can't miss him._"

The announcement over with the team stood in surprise before Sparky broke it.

"Now that is convenient." She chuckled.

Garrus agreed. "It is," he glanced behind him. "Vter, you and your Sangheili have happy hunting, when shall we meet back here?"

A flicker of movement. "Three cycles. A cycle of waiting, if you do not show, we will assume you have been caught and are engaged." he replied, "I expect the same from you." he added.

"Done," Garrus nodded quickly. "Happy hunting, Ship Master."

"To you as well, Commander."

And then, the flickering forms moved along, parting and soon they

disappeared into the winding hall and streets of Omega, leaving Garrus and his team to their own machinations. "Alright," Garrus said, rolling his neck and folding his helmet back. The others followed suit. "Lets find this recruiting station and Jacob Taylor."

He had to be the human they were after, right?

****End of Chapter Twenty-Two****

* * *

><p>Another updateâ€¦ in less than three days?! I know, you're all shocked, and astounded. And probably wondering if I'm really Drake S. Hellion and not some impostor, I assure youâ€¦ he didn't deserve to keep this going! But really, yeahâ€¦ hope this was worth the minimal wait. As you can see, I'm pulling out more than a few stops and throwing them at your face like curveballs! Cloned Halseys. Sangehili commandos working with Garrus! A suped up Omega and Miranda and Jacob, like Leng, getting shit done! Along with some further development into the events back home near Earth.

****So, yeahâ€¦ until next update! Now, you've read, you can review! Thanks and good day**.**

24. Chapter Twenty-Three

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Twenty-Three****

****Omega Nebula, Omega Station.**

>TAF Recruiting HQ, Jacob Taylor. 14:00 Cycles.
****Once a rundown hospital, Jacob wasn't surprised to see it turned into a functioning Headquarters for the Policing forces now under his care to ensure were well trained, loyal and able to work together despite the myriad of different species that were part of his new assignment. Since he and Miranda had arrived Leng had immediately put them to work aiding the local forces getting themselves together into a real fighting force.**

It wasn't hard, honestly. A good portion feared Aria and unanimously decided that if she wanted an army then she was getting one. A few had taken offense to being trained and becoming enforcers of the law they'd outrun before.

Aria promptly smeared them across a wall of Afterlife and told the others that was the official Resignation wall.

He really hoped they cleaned that wall by now.

From his view point on the second level main office he could peer down into the main reception area of the HQ, watching recruits file in. Thankfully a lot of the initial recruits for the Armed Forces he'd received had military training. Mostly Turians and Batarians, A few Salarians and Asari as well.

At first, he didn't know what to think about the new Aliens. As an

ODST he was well acquainted with the Sangheili, Kig-Yar, Unngoy and Jiralhanae, species he encountered back in human space fairly commonly as a sort of security detail for mixed species colonies. But these new ones? Asari? Batarian, Turian and five others? Or was it six? A new crash course that was.

Miranda of course got the flow of it already, that's why she was coordinating the refits directly with Aria, while he was taking care of the now newbie police forces who would be in charge of keeping the laws of Aria and keeping general order on her station. Leng wasâ€¦ well, who knew where that creepy bastard when not at Aria's side? Probably off trying to see if he could something if Jacob had to guess.

His eyes glanced over to the two lines for recruitment. He could only see half of that number becoming part of the policing forces since only half seemed competent looking, others just looked a bit lazy and were just trying to get any form of job to support themselves since this was, technically, one of Omega's very few actual live broadcast job openings sinceâ€¦ well, he hadn't been too much attention to the history of mining station.

_Well, _He thought staring down at the line and spotting a few of the homeless among them. _I suppose I could see if I could find them jobs working cleaning duties? Even if they'll receiving accommodations for just becoming a proper citizen of Omega doesn't mean that taxes won't come into play once everything is sorted_. He toyed with the idea for a few moments before nodding. That's what he'd do, it would help a little more.

His datapad lit up with new dossiers from the aspiring recruits and he lifted it up, observing it with keen eyes. Lines of text scrolling across along with pictures of the individuals. He raised a finger and began to sort through the profiles, putting them into either "accepted" or "Denied". Fairly simple choices, until he got to the homeless. He sent them into the third option. "Alternate Assignment" and he was done with them.

Profiles sorted he lowered the datapad and sighed softly, turning and moving over to the overly lavish swivel chair he'd been issued behind his big fancy desk inside a newly cleaned, if bare, office. He slumped and booted up the console, entering his security password and getting into Omega's informational system. Checking the secure network and receiving a connection he checked if he had any new orders from Miranda.

None.

Jacob cut the connection and leaned back into his chair, eyes on the ceiling. Eyes going distant. TIM, a nickname he was surprised stuck so quickly, had informed them the other day about events back home and the news was surprising. The Office of Naval Intelligence, the spooks of the UNSC who had been uplifted to mythical status of untouchability had been put down. Hard. Via Operation: BLACKOUT.

Any remnants of the organization left had quickly fled into the more loosely secure outer colonies, however many of the key players were now dead or awaiting execution. Others were likely being interrogated and a newer branch of Intelligence was being put into place in its wake. One created by the Fleet Admiral himself.

United Nations InTelligence. UNIT.

Jacob had almost believed that this meant that he could leave this outfit then, get away from Miranda, Leng and TIM. Go back home to his father who would no longer be under the clutches of ONI. But the look Jack had sent him that meaning told him everything. His father was still in Jack's hands and still very at risk.

His little after meeting speech to him alone was also a good reminder.

"_I brought ONI down with a few billion credits and a single data chip, Jacob. Remember where your loyalty lies, and where that continued loyalty keeps your father. Safe and happy in the knowledge his son is serving proudly_."

The male closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. He knew he should have turned back a long time ago, he'd done some shady shit for the Spooks since hisâ€|_invitation_ into their ranks five years ago. Assassination, subterfuge and general spookiness. Mostly he was just hired muscle and operational assistant to Miranda. He kept her safe and in return she kept putting good words in for him to TIM.

Over those five years, she'd, admittedly, been something of a friend to him. She knew his circumstances and had expressed her pity from the started, offered apologies and confessed if she had the power to pull him out she would. But TIM called the shots and she was loyal to him alone, so while she pitied and understood his angle she wouldn't defy Jack for him.

His console pinged and he sat up, listening. "_Ops Chief? It's Patrol Nine B here to see you. Should I let them in_?" his guard asked.

About time! He'd gotten reports that Patrol Nine B was being lax in its patrols in the lower levels, two of its members were caught ON DUTY drinking at one of the damn bars! And it's leader was currently on Red Sandâ€| he had to set them straight. "Let them in." he confirmed, grumbling. "About time." he leaned back into his chair.

He took another breath.

And that was when the doors to his office parted and he sat up to see five well armed individuals march in with arms drawn and aimed directly at him. Reacting on reflex he ducked down beneath his desk and drew his M6H and reached behind himself, drawing his combat knife as well.

He was now wishing he had his armor with him too because he was fairly certain one of the large ones was a damned Krogan.

* * *

><p>1 Cycle prior, Garrus Vakarian.
>Garrus couldn't be more nervous unless there was a laser sight printed on his forehead and even he was fairly certain he could shrug it off if he concentrated hard enough. But walking into a very busy part of Omega where he, via quick headcount, was up against at least

four dozen hostiles? A few of which were Krogan armed with heavy weapons. Batarians making the majority of the forces, a few Turians and Vorcha in between.<p>

And to his furthest amazement Turian and Batarians were standing by rows of new "recruits" and explaining the basics of combat, others, from Garrus' angle of the walkway above them, could see a couple dozen more being put through actual drills by their Batarian and Turian drill sergeants.

Aria was even training her forces, arming them best she could and turning Omega into a damned fortress. All of this was rubbing Garrus' gizzard so wrong that he fought the urge to let his mandibles twitch in pure nervous agitation. And when the initial armed forces recruiting station came into view he almost blanched.

Wrex however spoke the obvious. "Two Anti-Armor manual turrets?" he huffed in annoyed approval. "Nice, but it bodes badly for us."

"I agree," Saren whispered beside Garrus' left. "Things go loud and we're gunned down in seconds." A pause. "I hope you have a plan?"

Garrus really didn't. "I'm working on one."

"Lovely." Saren groaned.

A voice came over the intercom. "Patrol team Nine B please report to Operations Chief Taylor immediately." A Batarian's voice ordered over the local intercom system.

Garrus' mind sparked with brilliance. "Sparky, hack their security, get us IDed as this Patrol Nine B." he looked to Dahl, "Make our IDs match, we have until we reach the front desk to report in." He said, "Soâ€¦ twenty or so seconds."

"Keelah!" Dahl gasped and brought up his Omni-Tool, beginning to search for suitable pictures of their little group that could pass off as them. The Extranet, thankfully, had no shortage of material. His digits were a flurry of movement.

Sparky moved just as quickly, her fingers dancing across her Omni-Tool as she worked to sync their current stolen ID codes to match those of the patrol they were impersonating. From beside her, Saren could see she was squinting in concentration while she worked as quickly as she could.

"Ten seconds." Garrus grunted, keeping his casual pace. At the very least no one was giving two furiously working Quarians any suspicious glances, or asking questions.

"Keelah, Wrex!" Dahl hissed to the Krogan behind him. "You have no pictures that don't seem directly out of an accursed issue of Badass Monthly!"

Wrex peered over the Quarian's shoulder and chuckled when he saw one of the images. "Ahh, I remember that," he said with a fond distance. "Never has beheading a fellow Krogan been so satisfying as that Varren bait."

"Security is ours, we're officially marked with Patrol Nine B. But now we those ID pictures or we may as well just hand ourselves in now." Sparky hissed.

"Looking!"

The doors parted into the recruitment station, the overdoor sensors just above the door to scan all those who entered and left. Garrus closed his eyes and counted down to hear the alarmsâ€¦

He stepped through and none came.

Garrus could have turned around and hugged the two Quarrians, but he settled for letting his shoulders sag in relief. Saren beside him exhaled in relief, Sparky closed down her Omni-Tool, Wrex grunted in amusement and Dahl hung his head in exhausted victory. The alarms were none the wiser and they sauntered up the front desk.

"Patrol Nine B," Garrus said to the Turian attendant, who gave him a look. "Reporting, we're to see the Ops Chief?" he raised a brow plate.

The bareface Turian nodded, gesturing with a talon down the hall. "He's up in his office, double time it, I think he's getting testy about something." his fellow Turian warned him with a good natured chuckle.

Garrus returned it with one of his own, slipping into his "I'm totally not the law" façade he would use during undercover and stakeout work back in C-Sec. "Thanks for the heads up." he said, turning and moving along, nodding to his team.

They proceeded along.

"Hey! Look, this guy's ID pic is from Badass Monthly!"

Garrus groaned and glanced back, looking at the desk attendants sharing a good laugh about it. Wrex, seeing Garrus look of warning, merely gave a large, toothy grin that said "What? We're not caught. You can't bitch." The commander grumbled and looked ahead.

They found the stairway and proceeded upwards, passing a patrol, a Turian and Batarian, they nodded at Garrus and his team in greeting, Garrus gave a small wave while the others nodded in turn as they passed.

"Hey!"

Everyone stopped and turned to the passed patrol, expecting trouble.

The Turian of the group was looking at Dahl, his silver eyes giving the Quarrian a once over before he approached the other male, tilting his head. "Don't think I've ever seen you working in the patrol groups before," the Turian said, eyeing Dahl.

Garrus' hand slipped down to his sidearm, he could see Saren doing the same for his. Sparky readied an Omni-Blade and Wrexâ€¦ well, he was looking ready to snap some skulls. Dahlâ€¦ looked like a leaf in the wind.

"Uh-Really?" He stammered, trying to compose himself, clearing his throat. "Well, I'm new! Probably why you've never seen me." he said, giving a slightly nervous laugh.

The Turian chuckled in amusement. "Probably, I think I'd remember someone like you." he said.

And it was that sentence that slowly made the group glance between the two males and the patrol Batarian's eyes roll in exasperation.

Garrus himself wanted to laugh, just a little. Sparky had no reservations and she was laughing, not so loudly, but she was definitely laughing. Saren sighed and shook his head, mumbling about "Turians and suit rats?" before moving ahead. Wrex grunted, mostly in disappointment at not being to crack skulls. Sparky followed the pair along the stairway.

"Ah.. Well, thanks!" Dahl wasn't sure what to say in this situation.

"Okay, okay, much as I'd love to see where this little drama of yours goes," Garrus said, drawing the others attentions, "You've have to take it up elsewhere, we've got to see the Chief. So come along," he gestured Dahl along.

"Of course, sir!" Dahl looked back at the disappointed Turian. "We'll uh, pick this up later?"

"Mm," The Turian turned, giving an idle wave. "Be sure to."

And so, the patrol continued along. And Dahl caught up with Garrus, together the pair moved on in silence for roughly three steps before the male Quarian heard his Commander's soft chuckles, making his cheeks tint behind his visor and hiss. "Not. A word."

"My lips," Garrus chuckled. "Are sealed."

They continued another five.

"Sparky's? Not so much."

Dahl groaned. The whole Albion would know before the week was over!

They reached the top of the stairway and found another hall, along it were several doorways, two guards at either side of it. Holding Avenger Assault rifles and Kredak shotguns respectively. Garrus noted their positons, then moved for the set of doors with "Operations Chief" over the door. His team in tow.

The pair of guards looked alert as they approached, one demanding. "Business?"

"Patrol Nine B, here to see the Chief." Garrus replied, raising a brow plate. "Heard he's testy, anything I should worry about?"

The guard shrugged, "Not a clue, I just watch the door." he raised his Omni-Tool. "Ops Chief? It's Patrol Nine B here to see you. Should

I let them in?"

"_Let them in_," a male from the other end of the com replied, grumbling. "_About time_." before the line went out.

The guard looked up, "You're clear-gah!" Garrus' hand shot forward, punching his throat, resulting in the Turian dropping his Kredak in favor of reaching up to clutch his searing throat. The other guard was halfway up before Saren was on him, wrenching the rifle from his hands, spinning it about and slamming the butt into the Batarian's face with a sickening and bloody crunch.

The other two guards raised their weapons and then they winced as their heatsinks overheated and their weapons began to fold back into themselves. Courtesy of Dahl's Weapon Scrambler tech. The pair barely dropped their weapons in favor for their sidearms before Wrex was in their faces, grabbing their throats and lifting both Batarians off their feet and grinning maliciously.

"Bye."

CRUNCH!

He dropped the two bodies and turned to Garrus, nodding. They were clear.

Garrus looked to his team. "Weapons out, we grab this human, then exit out the back and hopefully, keep things quiet." he turned to the door and pressed the open key as the sounds of weapons unfolding behind him sounded out. He himself pulled his Pheaston and when the doors parted he and his team marched in with weapons raised.

The human, dark skin, black fur atop his head, looked, and ducked down as if expecting a hail of gunfire. "Sparky!"

"Com's jammed!"

Dahl activated his scrambler tech and the human behind the desk growled. Saren rushed forward as the human stood, raising a knife to swing at the Turian, who kicked it to the side along with the arm holding it, forcing the human's body to twist with the force. Landing beside him, Saren slammed a fist into his side while grasping his opposite shoulder and twisting them about so he threw the human over his desk, scattering the datapads and spilling the mug of dark steaming liquid sitting atop it and at Garrus' feet.

The human groaned and rolled over, Garrus' looking down at him before raising his foot and bringing it down, the human was out like a light and the Turian glanced about before nodding to Saren. "Good work."

"Class A in Hand-to-Hand." Saren shrugged. "Honestly, a physical knife." he scoffed.

"They're more fun," Wrex chuckled, looking over the human and frowning. "This is the one who levelled a ship of Special Tasks Group?" he looked at Garrus, "You sure this is the human?"

"He's the only human on Omega," Garrus replied with a frown in his words. "He has to be the target."

"Even if he isn't," Sparky spoke up. "He can still give us information, yes?"

Garrus gave a nod and Wrex huffed.

Lumbering forward and lifting the human and holding him under his arm like an oversized bag, his Kredak shotgun in the other hand. Wrex chuckled. "Well, lets go." he glanced back at the hall. "Think they have a backdoor?"

Garrus hoped so, that was their only way for a clean exit. "Let's find out." he turned to Sparky, "Can you get us a layout of the building?"

"Already on it," Sparky replied, sending him some data and then raising her Omni-Tool, it began to project a 3-D image of the building, several green dots showing up as them. "We're here." they blinked. "And there's an aircar station here," another room, four levels down blinked. "We can get transport there. It's tight quarters and security cams appear to be offline." a pause. "They must still be getting this whole security thing set up."

"So we caught them with their suit unzipped," Dahl commented, "Good! Lets get going then!"

Garrus nodded, "Agreed, Saren, Sparky. You're on point. Wrex, you're on prisoner guard detail, stay in the center of the group. Dahl, you're with me on rear guard." he barked out the orders and he received a myriad of affirmatives. "Move out!"

As they left the office, none had bothered to check his deskâ€| particularly the blinking red button under the tabletop.

* * *

><p>Aria's Private Chambers, Kai Leng.
*The dark haired human leant against the wall as Aria lounged in one of her lavishly padded chairs, legs crossed and covered in not but a near transparent bathrobe as her eyes roved over datapads worth of reports from the various teams and sources throughout the station as they underwent their maintenance, order keeping and observational duties. There was a creasing of her brow before she sighed and set the datapad down, turning her gaze on the human who was still leaning against the wall impassively with his arms crossed. Content to ignore the basically naked Asari seated just a room across from him.

She shifted, her legs spreading for him for but a moment, giving him a peak of herâ€| and his head didn't tilt an inch. She almost frowned, she was feeling the urge for relief and her attempts to tempt the human had proven ineffective thus farâ€| maybe he was gay? Even then Asari attracted all comers.

And yet.

His eyes lifted and his lips formed a frown as he raised a hand to his ear and tapped it. "Miranda, what is it?" he said, impatience lining his tone. Another moment and he stood from the wall with a small urgency. "When? I'll be there." he turned to Aria. "Jacob's activated his office's panic button. We don't have eyes on him due to

our security systems still being calibrated. Miranda's calling me for retrieval." he tilted his head, dark locks swaying. "Orders?"

Aria frowned in annoyance, previous moods of seduction forgotten in favor of the cold and unforgiving pirate queen. "Kill all of them but one, bring me their leader, if you can. But any one of them will do." she arched a brow. "Got it?"

His lips formed into a dark smirk. "Oh, perfectly."

That tone of voice sent a shiver down her spine before he flickered from view, going into cloak.

The door opened and she knew he was off.

Leng rushed along the halls, jumping over the railing of the third story where Aria's private chambers of Afterlife resided, he fell and landed on the table of a dancer, startling her and the Turian she was currently dancing for. He leapt forward and ran out of the main entrance, eyeing the area before Miranda's voice came over the com again.

"_They're on an Air-car! Flying through level levels three! They'll be passing through the central distract space at sector Delta Five_!" she informed him. "_Two air cars, TAF issued. Their course puts them goingâ€¦ either to the hanger Nine or five_."

"Delta Five?" Leng paused, peering at the ledge leading around Afterlife, then he frowned. "Understood." he rushed forward, reaching behind himself and gripping the handle of his HF Kusanagi and with a flourish he unleashed the humming blade, weaving between civilians who were waiting to get into the club itself.

He ran along the edge and peered downward before he leapt off into the open air, spreading his arms and going into freefall, he curled his legs and twisted his blade into a reverse grip, eyes darting around below him untilâ€¦

"Got them!" He growled over the howl of the misty air rushing past him. He flourished his sword and watched as two aircars sped along, weaving through traffic, if he were a Ops commander, he'd have put the prisoner in the second car and let the front act as escort. So, he narrowed his eyes. His body glowed and then slipspace warpedâ€¦ and he flickered from sight.

Only to reappear right in the path of the aircar, he curled his legs, absorbing the impact against the windshield, cracking the protective dome and flipping up and over with a growl of pain as his legs protested the action, even with the CNT muscle fibers reinforcing the limbs.

He twisted mid air and landed feet first a crouch atop the second aircar, his blade impaling the engine block. He looked upwards and twisted his blade with a jerk, the engines sparked and the car jerked sideways before shakily correcting itself. The side door opened and a pale, bareface Turian with a scowl raised his handgun and fired point blank at him.

Leng raised his hand, putting up a hard light barrier and let the shots ping harmlessly off the barrier with a smirk on his lips before

he jerked his blade forwards, slicing the engine even further. The aircar broke into a spiralling dive as Leng rammed his fingers into the hull as the Turian gripped the door and seat inside to keep from flying out from the rapid spin and sudden losing of altitude.

Leng freed his sword and slashed the upper shield, it flew off and he was greeted to the sight of a Quarian with a shotgun, firing into his gut and sending the human back into the air with a cry of pained surprise. Barely being missed by a civilian aircar as it dived after the falling TAF model.

_A decoy! _Leng realized, trying to ignore the pain in his gut as he fell, he twisted onto his belly and reared his sword back before flickering from view and appearing near the civilian aircar and thrusting his blade into the cockpit, it jerked sideways, then the opposite ways to try and shake him off. He rammed his fist into the shield, cracking it.

He glanced back and saw the Quarian and Turian from before had leapt up from the air and the one he was on accelerated enough to have them land on the shield, they both fired at the human, who jerked his sword free and raised a shield before kicking off the car back into the air with a frown.

He lowered the shield and flickered from view.

He appeared behind the Turian, about to bisect him when the aircar turned upwards to pull up from the nearing bottom of the Omega station, resulting in the three passengers feeling the sudden pull of gravity that shoved them downwards with grunts of surprise. Leng himself fell to his knee and hand, his sword still raised he slashed downwards, barely missing the Turian when he rolled further back down the car.

The Quarian, on his back, raised his shotgun and fired, barely Kai's shoulder, who twisted sideways, looking like he rolled off before slamming his clawed hands into the side of the car and gripping, hanging on he stabbed his sword into the driver's side door, the car jerked and he heard the distinctive roar of a Krogan.

The blade, still in the door, was suddenly wrenched out, coated in blood. The door opened and there was a Krogan in blood red armor, glaring down at him with murder written in his even redder eyes. "Not smart, human." The beast growled.

Leng could see him bleeding from his thigh, but that may as well have been a pinprick to the Krogan. The male kicked his legs and spun under the car as the Krogan aimed and fired his Kredak, once under he flicked under and upwards onto the front of the car, surprising the Quarian and Turian.

Kai was through playing with his food. He'd seen Jacob 's feet in the back seat of the Krogan, this car had his operative. The Quarian raised his shotgun, "Just die!"

Leng flickered from view as he fired, appearing behind him, the Turian barely altered his aim to correct his shot before Leng's arm flicked upwards and the spray of Turian blood, along with the arm holding his handgun, flew from the car.

The Turian stared at his stump of an arm in shock before he was kicked in the gut and off the aircar.

"Saren!" The Quarian yelled in vengeance, turning to face fully the human with his shotgun.

Leng was faster, he twisted below the shot, his ears popped from the sheer noise of it above his head and he glared upwards, twisting on his hand and kicking his feet upwards, knocking the Quarian's weapon upwards while the male flourished his blade.

A shimmering light and Leng fell back into his crouch atop the aircar, his blade lined with Turian and now Quarian blood.

The Quarian's head lulled to the side before his head separated from his neck and his limb body fell off the car, smearing blood across the windshield. He glared downwards and was about to impale the driver when a shot from inside the cabin came through and sheared his shoulder with the tell tale jagged cutting power of a Kredak.

Leng's blade freed from his grasp and fell into the depths of Omega, his shoulder a mess he glared and flickered from view. Appearing on another overhanging neon sign for directions. He glared at the retreating aircar, eyes narrowing behind his visor. He looked at his shoulder, it bled profusely.

He glanced upwards, catching the barest sight of the Aircar as it played catch up. He narrowed his eyes and raised his good arm, opening a com to Miranda. "They're not going for the hangers." He informed her. "They're going into the slums."

"_The slumsâ€¦! Damnit_!" There was the sound of fist meeting desk. "_With all the lowlife, Vorchas scum down there and no surveillance, they can hide in those tunnels and corridors for days_!"

"My thoughts exactly," Leng agreed. "Good news, I killed two of them."

"_I could care less, just get a force together and retrieve Jacob_!"

Leng's eyes narrowed. "Watch your tone with me, _Lawson_. I answer to Harper and Aria," he seethed warningly. "Not you. I've saved your boytoy from getting off station, the rest is up to you. I have to report back to Aria."

"_Leng, don't you-_"

He closed the com and stared down at the depths of Omega. "Boring conversation anyways," he muttered, standing and flickering from view in a slipspace micro jump.

* * *

><p>Garrus Vakarian
*>The Commander grit his teeth and couldn't stop the rumbling growl that left his throat. "Confirm? Dahl and Saren are.."

"_K. I-by the blood-K_!" Wrex growled through the com. "_Dahl got his head lopped off and Saren took flying lessons, believe me. I have the

blood smears on the car to prove it_!" another growl, "_And _now_ I'm losing power to main thrusters! I need to put this tub down or we're crashing_." The Krogan added with frustration.

Garrus growled again. "Damnit, set it down then! We're in the slums, this place is like a maze, we can lose them for awhile down here while I figure out a plan to get us off this damned station!" he ordered, taking several breathes. He'd lost people before, but damn it never got easier!

"I shouldn't have brought him," Garrus grumbled. "He wasn't a soldier, not really." he steered the aircar after Wrex's own. Watching as the bright, neon lighting of Omega became darker, more dimly lit and shabbier as they descended into the depths of the stations lowest levels.

Beside him, Sparky was silent before she squared her shoulders. "He knew the risks, They both did and died bravely." She said, glancing at him. "That's all any of us could ask for in the end."

"That doesn't bring either of them back," Garrus grunted and sighed. He didn't have time for this now, he had the rest of his team to ensure the safety of and he couldn't afford guilt and self pity now. He put his poker face on and com'd Wrex. "Set her down on that outcropping on the left, that should take us into the lower ventilation areas, give us a bit more breathing room since they'll assume we'll be making our way into the mining catacombs."

"_Right_." Wrex replied.

The Krogan then demonstrated his acute driving by skidding onto the alcove mentioned and almost right off, kicking the door off its hinges and pulling the human out under his arm, glancing to Garrus and Sparky as they set down like one was meant to.

Once they were out, he lumbered forward, sniffing the air. "Vorcha shit, and lots of Vorcha." he mumbled. "These lower levels are probably crawling with them, rabid bastards stewing in their own inbreeding diseased selves." he grunted. Looking at Garrus he added, "You better hope we don't run into more than a few of them. I don't fancy being eaten alive."

The Turian didn't reply verbally, but he agreed whole heartedly. "Agreed." he muttered, "lets move." A pause, "Sparky, set those cars to explode if they're tampered with, can you do that?"

"Easily enough," Sparky said, moving over to the engines and slicing them open, she reached inside. After a minute, she pulled her hands out and nodded, "They're good." she stood and pulled her Geth plasma rifle out.

Wrex unfolded his Kredak. Garrus raised his Pheaston. "Lets get going." he said, and together, the three moved into the first open Vent they found and into the darkened depths of Omega's lowest, darkest levels.

****End of Chapter Twenty-Three****

* * *

><p>Le gasp! Character death mid, I hope epic, aircar chase?! LE GASP MOAR! That said, honestly, had a little debate who to kill off, in the end I rolled a die and got four, which was Dahl's number, so, yeahâ€| how does it feel to know that the fate of Garrus' team lives are decided BY CHANCE?!

Also, sorry these chapters have been so Garrus heavy, justâ€| well, he's the one getting shiz done for now.

Ahem, anyways. Yeah, things on Omega are heating up! Leng cannot seem to get a break lately though, when did being a teleporting, HF blading asexual space ninja get so hard? Anyways, next chapter should feature more Team Garrus antics and give us a bit of a glimpse with things on the home front in Human home. So, yeah. Until next chapter!

PS. Note how I said Dahl died yet not Saren? So, yeah, Saren fans, don't string me up just yet! He's not dead! â€|..

Yet. -sideways glance-

25. Chapter Twenty-Four

In Infinitum: First Contact

Chapter Twenty-Four

**Omega Nebula, Omega Station.

>**Lower streets, Saren Arterius. 14:20 Cycles.

>Saren was in total darkness. He could feel nothing, hear nothingâ€| he was completely aware and yet not so, he was in some strange limbo. _Am I dead? _He thought aloud, expecting to hear his thoughts echo as if in some great hall. _Didâ€| What happened? _He concentrated and tried to remember what had brought him here. To this place.

He remembered the Aircar chase. The human with the sword. Their mission to capture the single human, now confirmed twoâ€| maybe even Spirits more now. His armâ€| his arm had been cut off and he'd been thrown from the Aircar.

But how did that bring to this unending darkness? Where was he?

And slowly he felt something return to his consciousness. A tingling, it was distantâ€| very distant, like a slow, tickling itch. He focused on it, trying to discern its exact nature. And in a flash of light, it turned from an itch into full on agonizing burning. Saren couldn't hold it, he tried to scream.

Saren's mouth opened and he shouted to the Spirits above, only to have a powerful hand clamp over his mouth and muffle his cry of agony as his eyes shot open and his vision swam, he began to struggle against powerful grips and heavy bodies as the sensation continued for but half a second before it left his arm in a slowly dying burn.

He smelt his own flesh cooking.

His ghostly blue eyes glinted once and his vision cleared. Above him were the five Sangheili, all peering down at him from their angles across his body since they'd been holding him down. He turned his eyes and saw one with a large, glowing sword of energy that hissed as it deactivated. He looked further and saw the source of his agony.

They'd cauterized the severed portion of his bicep.

The hand left his mouth and his voice returned quickly as he immediately cursed them and sat up, looking at his arm, then at them as they gave him space inside the musty old abandoned apartment room he saw they were inside of. "You damned idiots!" he raised his Omni-Tool. "I have medigel!"

They didn't have to put him through that damned pain when they could have just applied some Medigel. Fools.

"We are not trained in your medical practices, Turian," Captain of the team replied, lowering his glowing red visor to peer down at Saren, and the Turian suddenly felt smaller in the presence of the eight foot tall lean and muscled creature. "Besides, this method will stem the bleeding more permanently than any gel you adhere to it."

"And a little pain is good for ones spirit." Another of the Sangheili growled, receiving agreeing grunts.

Saren stood, ignoring the urge to push himself up with his now three-quarters-gone arm and used his other instead. Once he was on his feet he sighed and considered his options, then he asked. "How did I get here?"

"We saw your mid air battle," Vter explained. "When you were ejected from the battle, you hit into the lower streets, evidently the Gods themselves have blessed your existence, for your landing was softened by two sheet metal stalls and atop another air's replacement shield," a pause. "The fact you are standing is a testament to your fortune."

Saren honestly couldn't believe it so instead of questioning further he closed his eyes and accepted it. "What about the rest of my team?" he asked now.

"They escaped, however we believe one of your comrades did not make, one with a full suit, a€|" Vter paused. "Quarian? Yes?"

"Dahl," Saren said, feeling oddly at a loss for the death of his comrade. Sure, he was a damned suit rat but even then he'd been a brave, and creative, one who had been willing to, and in the end had, give his life. Saren decided he would at least honor his fallen comrade and never refer to him in particular as a suit rat again.

"Did you find your bounties?"

Vter nodded, reaching behind himself and pulling a bloodied sack containing two large lumps. "There's only two, where's the third?"

"Left in the midst of their security team's bodies," Vter chuckled, reaching behind himself and attaching the sack of heads onto his belt again. "But enough chatter, we must move if we are to reach your team and aid them."

That surprised Saren. He'd thought they'd wish him and his team well then be off. "You're going to help them out of this?"

"They aided us in getting inside the station," Vter cocked his helmeted head to the side. "It would be right to aid you and the others get out of it." he turned to one of his fellow Sangheili, nodding.

The other took its cue, reaching behind itself and unclipping a solid blue weapon from its hip, it had two prongs and appeared to be an amalgam of two weapons, however when Saren gripped it he was surprised by the sheer weight of it, in his grasp it appeared more a small assault rifle. He hefted it up, no sights and unlike Garrus, Saren didn't have an optical HUD piece either.

"No sights?"

"You will have to make due." Vter grunted, and growled lowly when he peered at the door. There were a series of footsteps behind it, voices shouting orders to begin sweeping the area for the supposed "one armed Turian". "It appears the enemy is also aware of your survival."

Saren scanned the apartment. The furniture was gone, a few overturned non-kinetic-rounds proof crates and little lighting. "This place is a kill zone." Saren growled, the voices behind the door stopped and there was a click as the door's lock began to be hacked. "Spirits damnation!" He glanced around. No other exits. They were trapped.

"Killzone indeed," Vter rumbled in approval. "Spread out, cloak and stay in the shadows." He turned to Saren, "Appear injured, they will want you alive for questioning. Lead them into the room and we will make our first, and decisive, strike."

Saren raised a brow plate. "And if they don't want me alive?"

Vter shrugged. "Then you will be avenged." he replied simply.

"Right," Saren said, getting down onto the floor with his back to the door, hiding the Sangheili issued weapon to his chest and he sprawled himself out a bit as if he'd crawled there and just let himself go.

Vter and the other four Sangheili shimmered before flickering from view besides the odd distortion in the air here and there. When they stepped into the shadows, none would be the wiser they were even there. Saren closed his eyes and listened to the door open.

A few foot steps. "Found him!" A Turian called.

"That's him alright," agree a Batarian. "Grab em, Aria will want to interrogate him, learn who sent him."

"Right," his partner agreed.

A pair of approaching footsteps and Saren waiting patiently, resisting the urge to just outright turn and fire_. Closer,_ He thought with narrowing eyes. _Closer, come to uncle Saren_. He tightened his grip on the weapon.

And with a sharp hiss echoing through the silent room Saren rolled over and aimed out the door, ignoring the Turian being impaled and lifted into the air by the twin points of the same glowing blade by the invisible Sangheili. The batarian by the doorway have been pulled to the side, slammed head first into the wall with enough force to bend the metal, he saw three others outside about to rush in.

He fired. Applying pressure to the trigger systems.

A soft whine and then the weapon spat out glowing orbs of shaped plasma in an instant, a spray of super heated gases flew through the air, leaving sizzled trails of air in their wake.. Watching in surprised awe as the rounds didn't even activated the enemies kinetic barriers.

Armor, meant to soften and spread out kinetic slug roundsâ€¦ melted like paper against a welding torch as the globs of plasma ate through to bare flesh, flash vaporizing their skin, blood and muscle tissue, they screamed briefly and fell to his short barrage.

And like that, Saren understood. Really _understood_ how outgunned the Council was against the humans, and indeed any, of their allies they were.

These Sangheili not only had ship based Directed Energy weaponry, but they also issued it to their infantry units. DEWs would render all basic modern warfare tactics completely dated and very dangerous. No longer would kinetic barriers protect soldiers and ship alike.

Their armor, designed after centuries of Mass Effect sheared kinetic rounds, rendered useless as it was never designed to be pit against siph intense, concentrated heat. Their ships, fast and hard hitting, could never take a single hit from even the Human's Broadside guns, let alone their massive front nose guns and their allies weaponry in general.

These humans, their allies. They were single handedly the greatest threat the Council would ever face. Not plague, not rebellion, not corruption. Humanity and all its allies. Who's technology broke all rational limits and left only bigger horizons in the future. This same technology would destroy them in a war and now Saren truly understood that.

_Brother, _He thought with grief, standing on shaky legs. _I understand what you were saying now. It's all clear. Batarian, Asari, Turian, Volus, Salarianâ€¦ it doesn't matter what we are, who we were anymore. If our way of life, our power over the galaxy we know is to remainâ€¦ _He looked down at the polished blue plasma weapon in his hand. _We need to _adapt_, we need to push ourselves_. He gripped it slightly.

Outside the apartment, what people had been in the streets were now

scrambling for cover. Saren looked to the Sangheili, they uncloaked and looked at him in time for the shallow echo of a distant explosion. Vter growled in approval, "Very good, their shields are meaningless to our weaponry." he dropped the Batarian he'd been holding up by one arm.

Saren, only when the Batarian was slumped over and fallen onto his face did he saw the back of his skull had been caved in as well as the wall. "Our shields were meant for high velocity physical slugs." he informed them lightly. "Never in a thousand years did we ever dream we'd encounter Directed Energy weapons on ships, let alone infantry weapons."

"Our Gods, the Forerunners," Vter said, and the Sangheili in the room bowed their heads in reverence of the holy name. "Possessed technology even more vastly impressive then trinkets we now use. They created entire worlds, natural and artificial, governed all life so it may prosper and for untold millenia they were the guiding light in the darkness of the universe."

"Forerunners?" Saren repeated, mandibles twitching. "I thought the Forerunners were an ancient species who's technology was discovered by the Humans?" he asked, having heard the rumors from Falcus, where humans and Turians, albeit strainingly, mingled as a sorta middle-man colony between their two governments.

"They were," Vter nodded, "However, their technology wasn't discovered by the Humans, it was my kind, and the accursed San 'Shyuum, who first found their scraps left behind on our homeworlds. It was these scraps that allowed us to enter the stars as they did. Little did either of us know that their technology was not ours to plunder."

Saren's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"The Gods had chosen their successor, before the parasite could claim their last bastion and begin infecting the rest of the galaxy with its disgusting plague, the Forerunners chose a new species to inherit their galactic responsibilities to govern and protect all life. To see it to brilliance as they did when they, in their last gallant effort, eradicated the parasite by firing the seven rings."

"Ship Master," One of the Sangheili urged. "We've dawdled too long as it is, our allies require our blades!"

Saren could see the idea of not furthering the story of their Gods bothered the Ship Master, but he relented. "You're right, H'ror." He turned to Saren, "I shall finish my tale later, for now, your team have gone down into the depths of the station. We must follow them." he raised his longer rifle, the same blue polish upon it, albeit much bigger than the one Saren was using with a longer barrel.

"We will cloak and assist you as fighting breaks out, we will be behind you, do not worry, Turian."

"Saren," Saren said, interrupting him. "I am Saren Arterius,"

"Saren," Vter nodded. "Proceed then, we shall right behind you."

The bareface Turian nodded, raising the weapon and rushing out into the panicking streets. His barriers flared as two more hostiles fired at him from the down the corridor, he rolled into a kneel and fired a spray of plasma rounds. They were down in the first volley. Having expected their shields to block the short bursts.

Saren could feel the shimmering forms following him, any bigger forces he encountered would be more outgunned then a hundred to one simply because of the weapons they were holding in their hands.

Saren felt like a God.

* * *

><p>Omega Depths, Garrus Vakarian. 14:40 Cycles.
**Garrus, Sparky and Wrex paused in their steps when the dull "thump!" of an explosion behind them was heard through the vents piping, he glanced behind them then ahead. "Keep moving." he said, moving along. He heard Sparky and Wrex follow after him.

"I bet that was the cars." Wrex chuckled. "If we're lucky they'll think we took the spare fuel cells and lined our trail with explosive traps, make them move more slowly."

"Not likely," Sparky grunted. "They would only have to wait until they reach junctions for such traps, the pipes themselves couldn't hide explosives. They'd still make considerable time."

The pipes themselves were dark, the sounds of water dripping could be heard much of the time, others they had paused to listen when there was a sort of clattering along the pipes, or when Wrex sniffed and said he smelt Vorchas. They'd not encountered the things yet, thankfully, they couldn't have much delays and they needed to start moving upwards if they were going to get out of here.

"Long range coms still down?"

"Haven't bothered, these pipes and the sheer amount of stuff in our way back to Albion? Signal would never breach. We'd just ping the guys following us." Sparky replied, much to his chagrin. She was right.

The same skittering was heard and the group stopped and crouched low, eyes narrowing and weapons raised in alert. They waited in silence. A moment, two, three. There was a sharp, sloppy hiss before the darkened pathway ahead of them was silent once again. Garrus frowned and stood, "We're clear up front."

"And behind," Sparky muttered. "That sounded too close."

"It was," Wrex growled and looked upwards, his weapons flashlight illuminating the piping above them. Revealing a single Vorchas, eyes widening in pain as the light reached its eyes, it hissed and lost its grip on the exposed wiry skeleton of the hole in the pipe, falling onto the pipe.

Wrex walked forward, stomped on its chest with a sickening crunch that silenced its hissing cries, it began to claw at his foot, leaving scratches on the armor while the Krogan levelled his weapon

right in its face, revealing pointed teeth, dried blood and bits of flesh still stuck there. "Disgusting." he sneered.

BANG!

The Vorchas lacked a head and he kicked its body before peering up at the hole. "Clever bastards, must have been days of clawing through the pipes and then making their own little dens," he mumbled. "I'll bet you follow that, you'll find a lot more."

"And they'll have heard your shot," Garrus said slowly.

Wrex slowly grinned. "Yuuuup."

"Keelah." Sparky stepped back. "Movement!" she raised her Geth rifle and opened fire. Shooting at the dozens of shapes moving behind them in the shadows, a screech and then they stood, breaking into full on sprints towards them. "Lots of movement!"

She held down the trigger and sprayed the pathway, downing more than a few of them but the rest came, and entered the light.

More Vorchas, eyes red, teeth bared in rabid hunger and naked as the day they were born. Scarred and claws raised.

Sparky never felt more frightened. And she fired more. "Move!" Garrus said, turning and sprinting along. "It's clear ahead! Run and Gun!" he barked his orders.

Wrex roared and rushed forward after Garrus, Sparky, after firing once more, turned and sprinted after them as well. Together, all three ran along the pipeline. Behind them, she could hear the sounds of the fast pattering feet of the Vorchas giving chase. Garrus jumped forward onto a junction chamber, glancing at the five different pipes they could go through.

Wrex leapt in behind him, followed by Sparky. They turned and fired into the oncoming horde. "Pick a way, Commander!" Wrex growled, and raised a fist, his body enveloped by the glow of biotics and he threw his fist forward with a bellow of challenge.

A series of solid explosions filled the air before it, spreading along and slamming into the oncoming Vorchas, sending them flying back and into their oncoming comrades, knocking them down and putting the wind out of them.

Sparky raised her Omni-Tool. "Tech mine out!" Thump! The mine stuck to the wall and began to blink, signalling its proximity fuse was activated.

"This way!" Garrus rushed into one of the pipes, this one leading upwards into hopefully a less hostile part of the station. They ran along the pipe, into the furthering darkness. He could hear water running, more steadily. It had to be a drainage junction up ahead. They could follow the pipes further upwards.

We can make it! Garrus thought, pressing his legs harder. _We can make it!_ He thought.

He saw the tunnel end, and knew they reached the junction. "Up ahead,

another- Spirits!" he slid to a stop, feet sliding across the pipe until he stopped at the edge. . Behind them an explosion echoed. Sparky's tech mine going off. But ignored that, instead.

Wrex caught up, and stopped as well. "Ah ancestor's blood!" he growled in annoyance. "Really? By the blood _really_?"

Sparky bumped into his hump, and she stepped beside them.

The junction's floor grating had been rusted away by the leaking water that it was broke in several sections, bent and decayed, Garrus knew not a piece of it would hold their weight. And the pipe leading upwards? Was a good jump straight away and then fall down? He couldn't see the bottom, just darkness.

They were trapped.

"They're coming." Wrex growled, turning around to face the way they'd come from, the sounds of the Vorchas rushing after them reached their ears as well, there was a lot of them. "We have the ammo, but our guns will overheat long before they run out of Vorchas." he mumbled.

Garrus glanced over the junction. There had to be a way out of this, the other pipes in the junction were sealed off by thick grating, and again too far to jump to. He growled. "Shat's shit!"

Wrex rumbled, turning to Garrus. "Garrus," the Turian turned and Wrex held the groaning human out, "Hold him. Tightly." the Krogan growled. When Garrus dropped his Pheaston and hastily grabbed the human bridal style, he stared at Wrex. "Wrex, what are you-"

Wrex glowed and biotically flung them across the gap right into the other pipe, he looked to Sparky next, who stared back at him. "Wrex," she began, "Tha-"

"Yeah, yeah. Shut up." Wrex held out his hand, "Your spare Kredak." she handed it to him without hesitation. "Good," he flung her as well, she rolled beside Garrus and the human. Wrex raised both Kredaks, one in each hand and chuckled. "Now get going you two! The council paid top dollar for this mission and I never leave a job half done!"

He turned his hump to them, rumbling a low chuckle.

"Wrex! Try to make the jump!" Garrus called. "You can do it, just use your biotics to carry yourself!"

"Never learned how to do that!" Wrex called back over his shoulder. "Besides, I'm not dying here! Just giving you two pansies time to reach safer waters!" He laughed and turned back, he could see the shadows of the Vorchas, he growled. "Come at me you varren inbreeding shits. Urdrnot Wrex had a few presents for you." he mumbled. "Now go! If I don't get topside, then assume I'm laying low!"

Garrus stared, before sighing. "My Pheaston!"

"Keep it!" Wrex replied. "Too small for me anyways."

"No, I mean its at your feet!"

Wrex peered down., "Oh," he holstered one of the Kredak, reached down and threw it at the Turian, who caught it with one arm. "Now will you go?! This is getting cliché!"

"Good luck, Wre-"

"_Fucking go _or I will shoot you _both_ in the _knees_!" Wrex roared.

"Going!" Garrus turned and Sparky followed after him.

Behind them, a mighty roar of "You shall not pass!" echoed out, followed by the sounds of dual Kredak's blasting.

Garrus and Sparky ran in silence, following the upwards pipe as it moved along. "Sparky, take point!" He said. In his arms, the Human groaned, making Garrus look at him.

"Ughâ€¦" his eyes blinked slowly. "What-"

SLAM!

Garrus drew his head back, shaking it briefly as his vision swam from the headbutt. The human's head lulled back, mouth partially open and once again KO'd. The Turian didn't have time to deal with him right now.

"Hostiles!" Sparky opened fire in a burst, tearing down two Vorcha who dropped from another hole in the pipes. "Keelah, they're everywhere!" she shouted, angry. Raising her sights she fired into another as it dropped down from another hole. It hit the floor with a wet smack.

They jumped over the body and continued.

They rushed along, Garrus seriously wishing he was strong as a Krogan right now so he could fire his offhand weapon, but with the weight of the human would keep him from firing effectively. And a missed shot in this situation could get him killed. Also could relying entirely upon Sparky.

"Gap!" Garrus called, seeing a hole in the flooring. Sparky leapt, and he did as well. Even as Vorcha crawled out of it, hissed at them and ran after them as well. Joining the dozen or so giving chase behind them now. "Another!"

Sparky leapt again, curling her legs, then bringing them down onto the floorâ€¦ which then gave way beneath her feet, she screamed and fell, only for Garrus to slide down and grab her wrist, tightly. She dangled by her hand, staring down she spotted dozens of Vorcha, looking up at her from the junction she'd almost fallen into.

They growled and hissed at her, jumping at her hanging feet. "Yeah," She activated her Omni-Tool, preparing a tech mine. "No."

THUMP! Boooom!

The grating they were standing on gave, metal rent and bent as the weight of the Vorcha forced it down and they fell into the abyss

below. Sparky smirked, "Hang on Garrus!" she called, reached up and together they pulled her up.

She grabbed his handgun from his thigh and fired into the five Vorcha right behind him, they fell back, dead. They stood, "Thanks," Garrus said as she strapped his pistol back to his thigh.

"Thanks yourself," Sparky replied, chuckling before turning and moving along, firing two more tech mines into the hole she made— then she widened it with the dual explosives. "My last mines." she informed him.

And behind them they heard the sounds of screeching Vorcha who didn't make the widened jump in the floor.

"Another junction ahead!" Sparky called from ahead, keeping her rifle raised. She saw a hole in the pipe to the right and kept her weapon trained on the opening as she passed it— and missing the one above in turn, which a Vorcha dropped out of.

"Sparky!" Garrus tried to warn. "Above you!"

She looked up, rifle halfway before the Vorcha landed atop her, knocking her down, its claws dug into her side and bicep before it hissed and leaned down, biting into the point where her neck met her shoulder, she felt its teeth pierce her suit and teeth dig into the flesh below. She screamed in panicked pain.

The Vorcha dug in— and then received a boot to the face, knocking it off the Quarian, it growled and Garrus brought his foot down on it, its skulled caved and he turned to Sparky. "Sparky!"

She whimpered and tears bubbled at her eyes while she bled. her suit activated its area seals and Antibiotics flooded her system the next system along with painkillers. She stood, grabbed her rifle and looked at Garrus. "I'm," she cleared her throat. "I'm good, Commander." she said. Her shoulder burned, but she was alive.

Garrus nodded, and jumped into the junction, the tunnels were sealed. "Spirits damnation!" he growled, all the exits sides the way they came were blocked. Sparky looked for any terminals, seeing a door, she moved over to it. Garrus right behind her.

"Please tell me you can hack that lock." He said, hopeful.

"I can try," she replied. "but these systems are ancient." she turned to him, "Put the human down against the doorway, grab your rifle and cover me best you can. I need to concentrate."

"Right," Garrus set the human down, unfolded his Pheaston and rolled his neck, growling softly before he raised it and soon he could hear Vorcha coming up the pipe they'd just exited. "Alright." he twitched his trigger finger. "Focus, Garrus— just another day on the range." he closed one eye, focusing on his targeting optic. "Moving targets. Ten meter clearance." he mumbled, trailing off.

"Single shots. Maximum accuracy." He whispered, distant. "That's the Vakarian way."

The first Vorcha leapt through the entrance, it's head snapped back

and it crumpled to the floor. Two more, their bodies dropped with a pair of shots, their eye and forehead smoking. Another joined them. Garrus kept at it, eyes distant. They were just holo-targets, trying to get closer in a charging riot move.

Shot, dropped. Shot, dropped. Shot and dropped.

"Damnit," Sparky hissed behind him. He ignored her. "Come on you little Bosh'tet."

Shot. Another down. Double tap and two were sporting third eyes.

Soon, thirty two bodies littered the entrance, another Vorcha leapt up and over it, it's head snapped back as well and it fell down, rolling to a skidding stop halfway to Garrus. His Pheaston hissed as the weapon began to dump excess heat. A three point five second time on that. He folded the weapon and drew his sidearm as the next three Vorcha came at them.

"Anytime, Sparky." He mumbled, downing them as to more appeared. How many of these bastards were there?!

The door pinged unlocked as Garrus' sidearm overheated as well. "Good work, Sparky!" he turned.

"It wasn't me." Sparky said as the doors slid open to reveal.

"Saren?" Sparky and Garrus blinked.

The barefaced Turian stood there, weapon raised at them before he turned it on the pipe entrance and fired, mowing down three Vorcha and nodding them. "Inside! Quickly!" he urged them. "Vter, make room!"

_Vter? _Garrus looked over and spotted the cloaked Sangheili, all five of them. They made room on the lift, and Sparky and Garrus stepped inside, the doors closing behind them as he saw a dozen Vorcha flood the room behind them and the doors closed.

Garrus and Sparky both broke into relieved pants, their hearts hammer in their chests. Saren sighed and looked to them, "Sparky, Command-gah!" he was shocked when Sparky threw her arms around him.

"You stupid, plate head bosh'tet! I could kiss you!" She said, ignoring the looks of everyone else present. Even Garrus seemed surprised. She eventually peeled herself off, and before Saren could say what he was about to, she punched him. Hard. In the gut. He doubled over slightly. "And that's for you dramatic timing _and_ making us think you were dead!"

Garrus chuckled, shaking his head. Even Saren grunted in amusement before he stood straight, then frowned. "Where's Wrex?"

That kicked their moods, Garrus sighed and hung his head. "He stayed behind to buy us time." he informed his fellow Turian.

"Oh," Saren said, tone lower. "Well, his sacrifice wasn't in vain

then."

"Wait," Sparky blinked. "Did you grab the human?" she asked Garrus.

"â€|You didn't?!" To Garrus' horror, Sparky shook her head.

Saren groaned. "For Spirits' sakes!"

"I did,"

Everyone turned to Vter, who gestured to his leg, where the dark skinned human was sprawled. "I grabbed him while you two stepped into the lift. You must have missed it in your panic." he said, chuckling slightly at their expressions.

"Thanks for that, Vter," Garrus sighed in relief again. "How far does this lift go?"

"Into the middle streets, some maintenance building, we cleared it out mostly, it' should be a straight shot to one of the hangers there, if we can secure transport, we might make it the Albion. Or a distance they can pick us up safely from." Saren replied.

"Our stealth craft can retrieve us at closer ranges," Vter stated from his spot. "Once aboard, both our ships can make their way to a safer location and you can return to yours, and our missions will both be complete."

"So, to clarify," Sparky said, crossing her arms across her chest and cocking her hip attractively to the side. "We're essentially going to gun our way to a guarded hanger while the entire station is looking for us, somehow get a small craft and then fly out to meet the guns of the local fleet orbiting the station and then, by some miracle of surviving that, we get picked up by their stealth craft and then get to safety?"

Garrus, Vter and Saren shrugged. "Pretty much," Garrus said. "Yeah."

"Oh good," Sparky said, wiping imaginary sweat from her visor. "There I was thinking we didn't have a plan."

The lift stopped. They rolled their necks, bared their weapons like teeth and readied to go out guns blazing.

* * *

><p>February 8, 2581. Military Calendar.
****UNSC Infinity-Class Cruiser **_**Infinity**_**, Sol System. 1500 Hours.

>A lift to the bridge opened and out stepped Catherine, behind her was Hood, together they proceeded along. "I trust you remember the Infinity, Hood?" She asked him as they walked along towards the CIC.

"Of course," Hood replied with a nod. "At the time of it's construction, it was single handedly the most expensive ship the UNSC ever produced. Hell, it still retains the title next to the Daedalus." he glanced at her. "So, this is going to UNIT's primary

HQ?"

"Point on," Catherine nodded. "Leonardo had her refitted specially for the task, it was originally going to go to ONI, but, well, they kinda got put under. So, now it's ours." she smiled wryly. "Sadly, Roland reached the end of his life expectancy so he had to be decommissioned some years ago, but our newest AI is of the latest tech, like Majestic, he's top of the line and worthy of the _Infinity_."

Catherine glanced upwards. "Well? Introduce yourself already, Machiavelli." she urged the ceiling.

An AI avatar projected before Hood and Catherine, standing at Hood's height with his arms crossed behind his back and wearing old Renaissance era styled clothing. His face was hard, slightly aged and his expression cool. He looked at Hood, then at Catherine before bowing. "Captain Michealis," he looked to Hood. "First Lieutenant Hood."

He raised himself up. "I look forward to serving with you and UNIT," he offered them a brief smile. "As ordered. I've gone ahead and prepped our special attaches for the tactical meeting. They're waiting for you in the Ops briefing room."

"All of them?" Catherine asked.

The AI nodded.

"Good," she smiled and looked to Hood. "You're in for a treat old man, follow me." she gestured him along and altered their course to take them towards the elevators. While they walked, Hood observed the various staff and techs moving along, engineers as well. "Along with over three hundred support crew, we've two battalions of fully equipped ODSs. Hand picked security and Intelligence officers." she explained.

"We've also converted some of the space to fit our needs as a more advanced medical, research and R and D vessel. We even have our own ammunition factories to produce additional ammo." They reached the lift and the doors parted, allowing them to step inside. Once they closed, they began to descend downwards. "We're every kind of vessel under the sun, Hood. Our weapons and cyber warfare systems have also been upgraded with the latest in reverse engineered Forerunner tech." she went on.

Hood was impressed, very impressed. "How long ago did the refits begin?"

"Two years ago at Leonardo's insistence." Catherine replied back briskly. "He wanted it done sooner, but events as they were then forced him to postpone his schedule." she added.

Hood considered, ah yes, then was a particularly tough time for the UNSC budget, as there had been a spike in Insurrectionist activity in the outer colonies. "I remember him grumbling he'd have to set some of his plans back." he said, shaking his head. "Five years ago, anyways. He's been planning this for five years?"

"Honestly? I have no idea, he never tells me everything, I don't

doubt he's got a hundred plans all working, and even more in the back of his head," Catherine shrugged. The lift stopped and the doors parted. They stepped out into the corridor where a pair of guards saluted them. Catherine and Hood returned the salutes and proceeded along.

"The real kicker was I made some requests of my own of him," she smirked a bit. "It took a bit of haggling and convincing, but I got him to loan me some important tactical assets, if we're to be the best damn Intelligence unit out there, we need a damn fine specialist team." she stopped at a pair of doors, overhead was marked "Ops briefing".

"I think you'll know the leader of this particular team, we had to pull him off the dissection labs in Reach, he's been given Operation freedom with us for the next five years before he has to go back and they start picking at him again." Catherine flashed her eye into the retina scanner.

The doors parted and revealed ten individuals seated around a circular table, two seats were empty, presumably for Hood and Catherine. But the old man stopped and looked at one of the gathered attendees in surprise.

The man looked back at him, short, shorn dark hair. A slightly scarred visage and pale skin that hadn't been exposed to sunlight for a very long time. A set jaw and sharp, aging eyes that could cut ship hull. Beneath the sage green tank top rippled augmented muscles. And the stripes of a very special rank were etched into the fabric. MCPO.

"Officers on deck!" The man bellowed and stood with crisp speed, saluting. The other nine individuals stood as well and saluted to the pair of leaders of UNIT.

Hood returned it slowly, Catherine simply smiled. "Hello, John." she said, looking over at the man. "Out of those skimpy lab garments, huh?" She cocked her head, smiling wryly. "You look nice."

"Thank you," The man replied with a quick nod. Hood could see something flash across the man's eyes. He stepped around and forward towards the pair, stopping before Hood and offering a hand for the older man to take.

"Master Chief Petty Officer of the UNSC Navy, reporting sir." The man's scarred lips firmed into a small, barely noticeable smile. "It's good to be back in the field."

"John," Hood smiled, grasping the hero of Humanity's hand in both of his and shaking firmly. "I'll be damned, last I heard you were playing patient in some lab."

"I was, sir," John stepped back, nodding to Catherine. "Captain Michealis and Fleet Admiral Petrov however requested me especially for this detail." he paused thoughtfully, "I admit, I'm grateful to them. I belong in the field."

"That you do, Spartan," Catherine spoke up, crossing her arms. "I expect great things from you." her eyes roved over the others. "All of you. From here on out, we pick up the pieces of the mess ONI left

behind." she said, tone serious. "They left one hell of a mess, and more than a few of them have escaped our eyes, so we're going to find them and bring them into the light screaming."

Hood watched the Spartan hero regard Catherine. He could see the intelligence, nostalgia, flickering across those dark orbs and he knew instantly he was thinking of his lost comrades. Cortana and Halsey. Both had been important to the Spartan, very much so. Hood knew. The loss of Cortana had shaken the Spartan deeplyâ€¦ so much so that when the UNSC received a coded transmission from her he'd gone rogue and chased out after her.

That turned out to be a trap set by the Didact, Dr. Halsey and Jul. Butâ€¦ as it turned out, Halsey had set them all into her trap. And that had lead them to the Janus Key in her possession, and the Didact's weakness.

If only she didn't need to die to ensure John could save Humanity again.

Catherine finished her speech, turning to John and offering a small smile. "Welcome home, John."

He tensedâ€¦ then nodded. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Well," Catherine smirked. "Let's not dally any longer. Lets get to work."

Hood and John nodded. They could use some work.

****End of Chapter Twenty-Four****

* * *

><p>Yup! You all read that ending right! Master Chief, at long, freaking last, is back! John - 117 In the house, ya'll! Break it down! But no, really, I hope his reveal wasn't too soon, as I was going to save him for a much later point, but with the release of the Master Chief collection, I thought. "Y'know? Chief deserves some more spotlight." and so, here he is. And the Omega Garrus arc is coming to a close, woop! Still gotta tie some loose ends, but, you guessed it. First Contact is slowly, steadily, reaching its conclusion and soon I shall begin working on the second story to this one. In Infinitum: _**[REDACTED-LEVEL BLACK CLEARANCE REQUIRED!]**_**! Aren't you excited?!**

****Ahem. Oh, and for all you Wrex lovers, consider this a major hint to his fate. JUST so you know I didn't kill our favorite Krogan.****

****Wrex snippet! **_**Go**_**!****

"Spirits," A Turian Armed Forces officer muttered, he and four others had been following after the escaping operatives and they'd gone into the tunnels, splitting up to try and find them. And what they'd found? Vorcha, lots and lots of Vorcha. Crazy and hungry.

But this Turian's particular group found piles of bodies!

"Goddess, what did _this_?" An Asari muttered, pressing her foot to a

body, it shiftedâ€| and she fired into its back, it didn't move again.

"Damage to the bodies," The Turian replied, kneeling next to one dead Vorchas, "Suggests shotgun weapons, blood splatter and wall damage? I'd guess a Krogan Kredak." he stood again and nodded to his group. "Let's move."

They came upon a head end, more bodies piled, one so high it could be used to conceal a full person. The Turian grunted, stepping atop the bodies and walking, peering over and seeing no one, he frowned. "They somehow got across." he sighed. "No point in pursuing any further."

He hopped off the mound, turning to the Asari and two Batarians. "Let's double back, we'll meet up with Thorin and help him search his section. This one's a dead end."

They nodded, turned and proceeded the way they'd come from. And after a few solid momentsâ€| the mountain of bodies shiftedâ€|. Then a Krogan's hand burst from between them, along with a muffled curse and bellowing growl of "Ancestor's blood it stinks in here!"

Urdnot Wrex wouldn't be dying today.

****Wrex Snippet end!****

****There, you can all breathe normally and sigh in relief. Now, I need to sleep. Have a nice day or night, and do leave a review! I'm so close to that 800 mark I could froth at the mouth! I meanâ€| review if you want, y'know, no biggie. Would be nice, but ya don't have toâ€|****

****Kredak cocks- ****

****Just sayin'.****

26. Chapter Twenty-Five

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Twenty-Five****

****February 8, 2581. Military Calendar.**

>UNSC Infinity-Class Cruiser _Infinity**_**, Slipspace, En route to Sangheili space. 2300 Hours.**

>"Forerunner ruins?" Hood echoed as he, Catherine, John and Machiavelli gathered about the Ops briefing room for their first real deployment, originally they'd been on their way to Eridanus II for a snatch and grab, but a Priority One hail from the Atlas had them altering course on a dime to the edge of Sangheili space.

"Yes," Catherine replied and looked at Machiavelli. "Show us."

The AI nodded, and the circular table before them lit up and began to project 3D Images of a star map, zooming onto a particular system, which then zoomed onto a planet. "According to the hail from the Atlas, the Sangheili discovered Forerunner ruins on this planet here." He explained easily. "Which wouldn't be all that surprising if

not for the simple fact we used the Janus Keys ages ago to pinpoint every Forerunner installation in known space." The AI turned to them. "This one doesn't match any of those locations."

That caught Hood's interest. The Janus Keys had revealed every piece of Forerunner tech out there in the galaxy, ruins or fully working installations. All they did not reveal was the location of the massive station referred only to as "The Capital", and since this wasn't a space station they were looking at it wasn't said Capital.

So what was it?

"Could it be a hidden cache?" The Master Chief asked from his spot.

"No, it could not." Machiavelli shook his head. "The Janus Keys revealed all the caches, hidden or unhidden. No pieces of technology escaped the keys sides one key piece and this isn't that either." The AI paused to look considerate. "Still, the possibility exists that these ruins could be created by the Forerunners who might have survived the Halo pulse from the initial firing all those millennia ago."

Catherine nodded. "Or it could belong to another species, either way it's locked down since the Sangheili couldn't access it, and the Huragok they tried to have open the door got fried when it tried to give them access."

"Fried?" Hood raised a brow. "An accident?"

"Deliberate, when the Huragok tried to access the door panel a high voltage charge made it go up in flames." The Captain shook her head. "The entry to the ruins hasn't acted up since then and the Sangheili have since left it alone and are waiting for us to get there to secure the situation."

Hood mulled over these details. An unknown ruin where it shouldn't be at the edge of Sangheili space, almost at the edge of the galaxy itself actually and it was using security measure not normally found in ancient ruins? Something was itching at Hood's nose now and it wasn't age. Something was wrong here.

"Ma'am," Machiavelli spoke up, turning to her. "We're exiting Slipspace in one minute. You'd best return to the bridge." he advised.

Catherine nodded, "Right. Spartan," she looked to John. "Get down to the R&D and suit up, you're leading the ground team down to the site. Gain access to the ruins and secure its initial levels for further equipment and study." John snapped a salute and she turned to Hood. "First Lieutenant, Brief the rest of the ground than meet me on the bridge."

Hood saluted. Catherine stood, dismissing the meeting and moving for the lifts. Hood and John shared a look before going on their ways as well. Machiavelli stared at the planet's projection thoughtfully before the holotable shut down and his avatar flickered and faded.

* * *

><p>Research and Development Labs, UNSC

**Infinity****.

>John stepped off the lift and moved into a steady jog, Machiavelli guiding him to the desired location where he would find his armor. Coming to a stop outside a room with a sign saying "SPARTAN Outfitting", he raised a brow and stepped up to the door. It parted for him and allowed him inside.

He stopped short when saw what was inside the room.

Standing on a pedestal was a full black suit, matte black with no real shine to it even with several lights shining down on it. He stared, raising a brow and moved forward and stopping before it. He reached out and pressed his fingers to the material. It was warm to the touch, felt like leather as well.

"Ah, Master Chief!" He turned his head and saw a single tech addressing him. The man was smiling excitedly.

Chief sighed. _Great, _he thought. _A fan_. "Is this my new armor?" he gestured to the black suit.

"The first part of it, yes." The tech replied, moving to stand beside him and grin. "It's a beautiful combat skin, isn't it? Reactive crystals layer, meshed perfectly between two CNT muscle and reinforcement layers." The man sounded awed as he began to pace around it, staring at the black suit. "The EF reactive gel inside the outer CNT muscles also adds to the protection."

The chief just wanted to get the armor on honestly. They would be making the mission zone soon. "Can I get it on?" he asked, tone civil despite his growing impatience.

"Oh of course, reach around the back of the neck there, the silver notch? Yeah, that! Tap it."

Chief did as said, and the suit's notch split, and the entire back of the suit split until it slide off the mount. John caught it, and stared at it, then back at the tech. Who nodded and gestured for him to simply put it. He stripped, then slid the suit on, he was surprised at the weight of it as it came onto his body. One it was on his shoulders the Tech casually tapped the same silver notch and the back sealed itself back up efficiently.

"Alright, step one done!" The tech sang and gestured for the chief to stand atop the pedestal that rose from the floor. "On the pad chief, the next part is where the real fun begins."

John stepped forward and onto the pad. Glancing around as the floor and ceiling split open. Revealing a series of mechanized arms that were holding two halves of a chest piece, lightly armored one at that. Sage green in color with two flat power packs on the back, as per usual. The other pieces of the armor were instead on static mounts? That didn't seem efficient to allow only four arms to handle.

"Mounting main Torso piece." The tech said, working on a console as he watched the arms lower the pair of torso armor. Sliding it down and when it was level with John's body they slid together and

perfectly fit over his suit. A moment and the second pair of arms lowered and secured the pieces with locks at the shoulders and sides.

"Primary power source secured." The Tech bit his lip and then smiled. "Bringing your armor online now." The tech's fingers became a flurry of motion as he entered the proper commands. "And bang!"

Energy rushed through the suit and John swore it became alive. The gaps between his flesh and the suit left and soon the blackened suit was hugging firmly to his skin. It warmed, cooled and then matched his body temperature perfectly. Where it was once awkward to move his fingers against the thick material it became as fluid as moving his own limbs.

The power source hummed to life before quieting down. Then, the armor pieces that were awaiting mounting shuddered once. "Chief, raise your arms." John did so. And the pieces lifted off their mounts and much like the Didact's own armor they levitated to their proper places.

Plates of gleaming green armor flew and attached to his calves, feet, knees, outer thighs. Forearms, biceps, hands and fingers. Even more plating attached to his chest, back and gut in a series of narrow "scales" that curled and spread with the movement of his muscles. All held in place by some unseen force. And when pieces came for his face he closed his eyes and felt them place themselves upon his face.

A series of clicks and a soft ping later. He opened his eyes and saw the world through his new visor. Systems stats flowing across it all reading green across the board. A synthesized voice spoke calmly to him. "MJOLNIR Mark X operational. Systems all green. Combat status confirmed." John rolled his neck and his helmet didn't shift for a moment.

A sharp whistle and John turned to the tech, who was grinning like a child at Christmas. "Master Chief, welcome to the brainchild of fifteen of the UNSC's best scientists, a mixture of the late Doctor Halsey's notes and Forerunner reverse engineer marvels brought that armor to life, but youâ€¦" The Tech pointed. "You, Master Chief. Will make it the stuff of legends."

John didn't know why. But he too felt like a child on Christmas. "So what can it do?" he asked.

"What can it do?" The Tech smirked. "Chief, what can't it do?"

And that was when the alarms started. Both Chief and the Tech glanced upwards when the Captain's voice came through the intercoms.

"_All hands to combat stations! Our Sangheili buddies are engaging a Remnant fleet over the planet and we're already picking up chatter of a significant landing force! They are requesting combat support and we're giving it to them!_" There was a brief rumble and the Captain cursed. "_Bastards._" The intercom shut down.

"Well, you wanted to see what it can do?" The Tech looked to John and smiled. "Now's your chance. I'm guessing she'll be calling you any moment."

"_Master Chief_?" John heard the Captain's voice com over his private com. "_Get down to the hanger double time. I hope you're not rusty because you're going in on the first wave_."

"Understood, Captain." John replied briskly and turned to the Tech.

"I need a weapon."

The Tech smiled, and gestured him to follow. "Right this way."

* * *

><p>Thedus System, Planet Urro, Planetside Ruins. 01:00 Cycles.
***"Press the advantage!" Orno Kelrian commanded over the bark of plasma weapons fire as his ground forces advanced on the entrance to the recently discovered ruins. No doubt his traitor kin had informed the accursed human of these ruins by now, but if they were fast they could plunder some of the opening levels and then plant demolition charges to deny the humans their prize.

Paining as it was to destroy a sacred relic cache, if it denied their fated enemies the technology within then it was one step closer to redemption for the faithful.

Beside him, Kig-Yar with older Carbines fired upon the retreating Sangheili and Unngoy forces, outnumbered five to one and unlike them Orno had armor support in the form of three Wraith tanks, which hovered along. Their gunners firing bursts of plasma to keep up the pressure. Unngoy and his Sangheili brothers using the tanks as mobile cover all the while.

He chuckled, looking to his second in command, Velka. "These ruins will be ours within the cycle." he stated, then looked back to his advancing troops. Raising his plasma sword he roared in encouragement while his silent Second in Command glanced upwards.

A beam narrowly missing his head, he growled and didn't even flinch as the sniper who missed his shot was cut down by three of Orno's own snipers. Chuckling, the former Field Master advanced with his troops, Velka at his side.

His com sparked to life. "_Field master, we've a single human ship entering the battlefield_!" The overhead battle commander, Fleet Master Tala Mantakr, reported. "_Patterns match the _Infinity!_"

"It's but one ship!" Orno growled. "Crush it!"

"_At once, M'lord_." the com closed.

"Double the advance! Send in the Unngoy!" Orno shouted as he doubled his pace with Velka keeping up. If the Infinity was overhead, that accursed ship that had been the Holy Didact and Righteous Jul's undoing, then another fleet would not be far behind. They had to destroy the ruins immediately and be gone before the rest of the human's reinforcements arrived then.

A pity.

A mortar from one of the Wraith's arced and slammed into one of the dug in formations on the Cliffside near the entrance of the ruins, drowning the small group of overwatching Sangheili and Kig-yar. The pathway was narrowing and he growled. "Keep two of the Wraith's back! Use one as cover to press the advance," he turned to Velka. "See that this push is the last." he ordered lowly.

The white armored Sangheili turned her head, and nodded, reaching down and gripping the handle of her Plasma swords, igniting them as she stepped forward with a roll of her powerful shoulders. The various glyphs of the Gods adorned her armor, scratched meticulously by herself. She stepped forward and roared, raising one of her blades.

Several Sangheili saw her gleaming blade and roared, adding their various weapons to the air before following after the small horde of Unngoy in the final screaming charge that would overtake their foes' positions and allow them to begin denying humanity one more prize to further their accursed advancement.

Ahead of him. Velka rushed, as the remaining two dozen Sangheili and Kig-yar laid down a barrage of fire against her own forces, the Unngoy soaked up the rounds and she crouched lower, pumping her legs faster as she zeroed in on the Ultra who was commanding these forces. Rage boiled in her blood and she felt her blade thrum for the blood of her traitorous kin.

Then the Wraith that had been helping their advance exploded in a shower of molten shrapnel, sparks and force as something from high orbit slammed into the vehicle, splitting near into three pieces. The Unngoy beside it staggered, some catching alight from the intense heat of the explosion itself.

She herself stepped back once and shielded her face from the intense burst of heat. Slowly, she growled. "Do not falter!" she roared above the screaming Unngoy.

And that was when she saw it. From the wreckage of the Wraith, writhed in plasma fire and hissing steam her eyes caught glimpse of its form. It walked forward, stepping past the wreckage and out past the blackened blue smoke. It's armor was gleaming sage, steam wafting up from its blackened flesh beneath the armor.

It's two glowing orange eyes found her and her once flaming blood was chilled as its gaze seemed to dig into her, her legs felt weak and she fell to her knees as if her spirit was destroyed along with the Wraith.

Her mandibles twitched in terror as the monster produced a large cannon of a rifle in its hand, the weapon assembling itself like the weapons of their Gods.

She didn't know who said it, but a voice full of terror whispered but one word that despite its volume was clear to the heavens itself.

"_Demon_!"

It raised its weapon and levelled it at her. She didn't dare prey for salvation, her Gods were no longer there. It flashed and her chest

was turned to gore as her shields all but shattered, she flew back a ways and as she watched the fleet above bursting into flames. She knew this was their end.

John fired once and the 20mm Armor Piercing - Explosive Core round did the rest, shattering the shield and exploding a blink after entering the body, tearing the Ultra's chest to slump. He turned his gaze over the other stunned forces. His sensors pinged and he shook off the shock from his kinetic landing.

In the Mark Six he'd have been lucky to just land and live after being shot out of a Pelican, in the Mark X? He was a weapon in itself.

"One hundred and thirty seven hostiles within seventy five meter radius. Small arms and Plasma Grenades." The same voice droned at him. "Threat levelâ€|"

John tensed his legs as the first few Sangheili began to get over their shock, and rage returned to their eyes. He twitched his trigger finger and readied to put his armor through its paces. May as well start with a sizeable Covenant ground force, right?

"Minimal." The TacComp finished.

He pressed forward, his boots kicked up clots of dirt from the force of his sprint. The Sangheili fired and missed entirely, trailing after the Spartan who'd just jumped from zero to fifty in two two point-four seconds. He raised the 20mm Auto cannon "Jackal" and fired into a pair of Sangheili along his path.

Their shields shattered and their torso's exploded as the round pierced their armor like tinfoil. A few Unngoy began to lay down a barrage of plasma and needler rounds. The Chief ducked and weaved, the plasma never touching him. The needle rounds pinged off his shields, which flickered a powerful silver at the affected area, rather than his entire being as previous shields had done before.

"Warning. Incoming Plasma Mortar."

He looked upwards and saw it arcing towards him, he pressed faster and then leapt upâ€| six meters into the air, curling his legs as the mortar struck where he'd been standing, immolating some of the Unngoy too slow to leave its radius. He got a good view, and saw the commander of the forces, along with two Wraith tanks. He narrowed his eyes and saw a pair of tracking globs of plasma from a launcher.

He wasn't about to get hit that easily. His shoulder popped and revealed two small thrusters. Which flared a brilliant blue and propelled him five meters to the side along with the aid of his left side boot thrusters. The round slowly turned to track him.

Another larger pair popped from his back and burst fired, to the Covenant below it appeared as if he had grown two brilliant blue wings for a moment as he flew forward, over their weapons and people right onto one of the Wraith tanks.

The Gunner began to fire. He punched the Sangheili in the face, shattering its shields and snapping its head back with a sickening

crunch. He then looked down and fired point blank with the 20mm auto cannon into the cockpit. The Wraith sparked, and began to drift lazily forward. He turned and jumped from the driverless tank as plasma mortar from the remaining Wraith struck it, destroying its comrade in an attempt to catch him.

John landed and broke into another run. He raised the cannon. "Anti Personnel Air Burst rounds." He said, and the weapon shifted, breaking apart in his grasp and reassembling into a shorter barrelled version. On his HUD the screen read "New rounds fabricated" and he raised it, firing full auto into the Horde of shield less grunts.

The rounds tore into them, bursting amidst them and showering them with heated shrapnel that burn and pierced organs. Dozens fell by the time he emptied the twenty round magazine. The weapon whined and the ammunition bar on his HUD refilled and another twenty rounds had been fabricated.

Another Mortar incoming and he slid to a stop, then used his back thrusters and burst forward, dodging it by a hairs breath and he felt plasma fire writhe about his form for an instant before going out from the acceleration and lack of fuel. He zoomed on the tank and held his weapon out. "Anti Tank."

The weapon broke apart again and became an elongated, narrow rifle and soon, four rounds appeared on his HUD. He raised it in both hands and leapt up to avoid the spray of plasma from the surviving Sangheili and Ungoy behind him, along with the gunner who was now tracking him. He took a moment to aim then squeezed the trigger.

His weapon roared loudly and a single narrow blue streak of light shot from the barrel and the Gunner's head snapped back with his helmet flying off from the narrow, needle like round travelling at extreme velocity.

He lowered his aim and fired again. The hatch of the Wraith's spark as the round pierced, it drifted to a stop and soon shut down once it confirmed its driver was deceased. The Chief landed atop the motionless tank, "Anti Personnel, Ex Core." he twisted around and raised the 20mm auto cannon to the remaining thirty-eight survivors.

They levelled their weapons back at him, but more than a few Ungoy were shaking at the knees. One of the Sangheili stepped back, looking ready to run. John's glowing orange eyes drifted over them and his weapon with it. Neither fired. "Surrender." he deadpanned. "Your friends in orbit didn't."

And they were going to reach ground in pieces.

"Never!" A voice shouted behind him and he turned, dodging the swing of a plasma sword, seeing a dirtied golden armored Sangheili, the Chief jumped back off the Wraith and levelled his rifle, but the Sangheili was on him again for another slash, John frowned and raised his arm to block and before the plasma blade could make contact a Hardlight barrier raised between him and the glowing edge of the blade.

He swatted it to the side and pressed the barrel of his rifle right into the Sangheili's gut. He fired once, twice and then once more. Blowing the Golden armored Sangheili back into the motionless Wraith, his fingers twitched, mandibles parted for breath and then he expired against his useless tank.

John turned to the rest of them with his weapon raised. "Anyone else?"

The Unngoy screamed, dropped their guns and huddled on the ground begging forgiveness and mercy. A few Sangheili dropped their own weapons and fell to their knee in a kneel. Only three stood and fired.

John put them down with three well placed shots as their rounds pinged off his shielding.

He opened a com to the Infinity. "Captain Michealis? This is Spartan One One Seven. Ruins secured and allies," he glanced at the surviving Sangheili forces, they were slack jawed. "Secure. I've got prisoners." he informed her.

"_Well, I'll be damned_," Catherine said into his ear, sounding amused. "_Our flyers were being kept at bay by Banshees, and you're telling me you just finished securing the site?_" she laughed, and he frowned. "_Well done, Spartan. Sending a security detail down there. Captain Michealis out_."

He turned to his Sangheili allies, who quickly got to work securing their Remnant foes in restraints. None resisted while under the watchful gaze of the Demon that was John-117. Once they were all secure, he let his weapon go and the thing floated there a moment before disassembling and the pierces drifted up and gathered amongst his forearm armor, meshing well with the overall armor with a bit more mass added.

He looked at his hands, clenching them. This armor was what he couldn't describe it. He'd taken risks during that battle, running into enemy fire and taking on heavy vehicles single handed, things he'd done out of desperation and having no other options during the war. But now? He just knew his armor would let him win. And it had.

He clenched his hands again and the Tech's words echoed in his head.

"_But you. _You_. Master Chief make it the stuff of legends_."

John was starting to believe it.

* * *

><p>Omega Nebula, Omega Station.
Space around Station, Garrus Vakarian. 01:00 Cycles.

>An explosion flared out on their starboard side and Garrus gripped the arm rests of his seat as their pilot, one Sparky, cursed in her language and dove to the side to dodge another series of close Anti-Fighter shots from the two pursuing ships as they moved between asteroids. Behind him, Saren was looking even paler and the Sangheili were bunched up in the back of the smaller transport shuttle.

Added to the already close proximity it was a very tight fit and only Sparky had some manner of room since she was in the pilot seat. "Bosh'tets!" she cursed and did a barrel roll. Garrus grit his teeth and Saren groaned in a rather sickly manner.

"S-Spiritsâ€|" Saren moaned. "Justâ€| let them kill us!" he raised his remaining hand to his mouth as if to hold back the bile that wanted to find its way back out.

Garrus tried to shift away from him. "Don't you dare throw up in here!" he growled. "That's an order, Arterius!"

"Orderâ€|" Saren heaved dryly. "Understoodâ€|Oh spirits!" he leaned against the transports wall as Sparky skimmed along an asteroid and then did yet another spinning roll to avoid two fighters that broke off and gave chase in place of the larger ships since they were entering more dense parts of the field.

Garrus ignored his going to be sick squad mate in favor of leaning down to say to Sparky. "I thought you said you could pilot!"

"The fact we're not being shot down is testament to that claim!" Sparky snarked as she turned, evading another but of weapons fire. "Where the hell is your ship, you Sangheili special commandoes WHO DON'T GIVE EXACT COORDINATES!"

Vter grunted, raising his wrist, brushing Saren's back in doing so due to the close quarters. "We are nearing their position, proceed straight-" he shifted to keep himself upright when she ducked right and veered left sharply. "Ahead." The Sangheili finished.

"That's real helpful!" Sparky growled and flexed her fingers on the controls. The shuttle shuddered and alarms blared. "Damnit! We're hit! Losing left side engine!" she began to work the controls, trying to fix what she could.

"We're going to die," Saren coughed, heaving again. "Thank the Spiritsâ€|"

"Oh suck it up!" Garrus growled.

And then, they reached a clearing in the field. No cover, no chanceâ€| until a flickering field revealed a Large Frigate sized green colored ship, that quickly fired two precise beams and destroyed the pursuing craft. It's shielded landing bay blinked, guiding them. Sparky flew towards it and right into the shielding and inside.

The shuttle puffed and slid across the deck, coming to a stop against the wall. She slumped forward and pressed the open door button. Both doors flipped open and the Sangheili stormed out.

Vter barked to the local forces. "Have us jump to Slipspace and exit near the edge of the system!" he ordered. "And inform their frigate of the exit coordinates and tell them to meet us there!"

"At once!" An Unngoy saluted and waddled off to fulfill its duty.

The Commando turned to his guests. "Settle yourselves, we will be

safe once we jump to Slipspace." he informed them.

He pointedly ignored Saren as the Turian emptied the contents of his stomach onto the otherwise polished deck of the hanger. Garrus himself looked a little shaky in the knees as well, and only he and his commandoes had not been overly shaken by the experience. Sparky stepped off, stretched her arms above her head and corrected him. He, his commandoes and her.

The ship shuddered once as it transitioned to Slipspace and Vter chuckled, looking at Saren with a shake of his head before marching over to Garrus. "You fought well." he said, tilting his head. "I am sorry for the loss of your other team members."

Garrus raised a hand, shaking his head. "Thanks, butâ€¦ it doesn't bring them back," he sighed and leaned against the shuttle. "I'll just be glad to get some rest after thisâ€¦"

Somehow, Garrus doubted with every bone in his body that would be case once he turned his findings and the human over the Council. Aria was building an army, Humans and Sangheili were operating in the Terminus systems and he feel something about this whole situation was just wrong in a way that made him uncomfortable.

For one. Aria had never been this bold, and the resources she was usingâ€¦ where did they all come from? And the fact that Pirate forces from across the Curtain were appearing as well now. Added to the fleet she was assembling. What in Spirits' name was her end game then? And was this all her with Human support? Or was there another guiding hand above even her?

No, Aria was an Asari and she wouldn't manipulated so easily. But that didn't change the fact there had to be an unseen player in the game yet to be revealed. He looked at the unconscious human slumped against the shuttle's hull and narrowed his gaze. This hadn't been the human who'd fought the STG, the one with the sword had been.

The one who killed Dahl and took Saren's arm off. Garrus would remember that next time he had a good firing angle.

Vter lowered a hand from his ear and looked at Garrus. "We'll be at the meeting point in ten micro cycles. Do not get comfortable." he paused, then held out his hand to Garrus' surprise. "I am glad to see Turians live up to their reputation."

"Ah," Garrus said, reaching over and accepting the large hand. They shook. "I'm glad you didn't shoot out us out of vacuum." Garrus gave a cheeky smirk.

Vter chuckled, stepping back and turning away. "Mm, not this day, it seems. But I feel a war brewing in my bonesâ€¦" he paused to tilt his head. "We may yet become foes on a battlefield, Commander Vakarian. If we do, I will look for you on the field."

Garrus felt that was a sign of respect, and so nodded. "As will I for you." he responded. Vter huffed approvingly before continuing on, his Commandos following after him as they left the hanger.

Vter's words didn't bring comfort to Garrus' worries, only solidified them further that there was a bigger game being played now. One that

went beyond Aria and the Terminus systems. He'd hoped the UNSC and The Council could stay on peaceful terms, but it seemed that wouldn't be the case.

Suddenly exhausted, Garrus leaned against the shuttle and crossed his arms over his chest with a brief sigh.

Sparky stepped up to his side. "You alright?" She asked.

The Turian regarded her before shaking his head. "Worried." he replied and closed his eyes. She didn't reply, simply reached up, placing a palm on his shoulder and giving it a reassuring squeeze. He looked at her, then he nodded.

Beside them, Saren retched again.

It wasn't long after that they were back in the shuttle and making their way back to the Albion. Pulling into the hanger with their shot up shuttle. Again making an skidding landing and stepping out, thankfully Saren was more composed this time around and didn't make a mess. Garrus and Sparky gave the pale Turian a pat on the back before they proceeded towards the lift and gathered inside.

The doors closed and Garrus looked to Saren. "Get those wounds checked out you two," he ordered them, gesturing to Sparky's shoulder and Saren's arm. "I'll be on the bridge." He paused. "And take the human."

"Sir," They chorused with a nod. Grabbing the human by the arms between them.

The doors parted and allowed them out. Another salute, and the pair were off the medical office. Garrus continued upwards into the CIC. Once on the deck, one of the operators called out "Officer on deck!" Much to Garrus annoyance. He let it slide in favor of getting to the bridge.

When he got there, his sister turned to him and her eyes shone with relief. Garrus gave the Turian equivalent of a smile in turn before saying, "Helmsman Vakarian, take us home."

Solana turned, gripped the controls. "Aye aye, Commander."

And they were off back towards the Relay. Garrus closing his eyes and taking a short breath. Despite the losses, they'd secured their human and escaped a den of criminality against the odds. Though only because of their Sangheili Temp-Allies. He owed them that at least.

****End of chapter Twenty-Five****

* * *

><p>And there's Chapter 25! And yes, I went full on "HOLY SHIT!" with Chief's Mark X armor. And you've all just seen a few of its abilities! Is it OP? You better damn well believe it is. That's thirty years of Forerunner and Humanity science experts putting together the ultimate tool of destruction that a certain Spartan-II could ever have.

****And we're now one more chapter closer to the end of First Contact and the next story in this little tale of mine. Thanks to all those who've shown their support, and to the peeps who read partway before leaving the story! Now, I must sleep.****

27. Chapter Twenty-Six

****In Infinitum: First Contact****

****Chapter Twenty-Six****

****February 8, 2581. Military Calendar.**

>Thedus System, Planet Urro, Planetside Ruins. 04:00 Cycles.
****It** had been three hours since the Infinity and its UNIT personnel arrived on the scene after securing the system. While local Sangheili forces tallied their losses and further aided in the security of the system while their Human allies conducted their business on the surface investigating the strange ruins.

"So, no other Huragok have tried to access the ruins?" Catherine prompted, running her fingers along the silver-grey metal of the doorway that had been hidden in the rock face until having been dug out by the local mining forces.

"No, Captain," An Ultra Sangheili adorning the glowing "Mark of the Arbiter" informed her.

Arno 'Dorannai was a trusted friend to Arbiter Thel Vadam and had been issued his orders to secure the ruins. And when the attack had come, he'd held the position for three hours despite being outnumbered five to one.

A true warrior who Catherine could respect.

"We did not wish to risk the life of a second Huragok." Arno further explained, looking at the doors with some hint of reverence before bowing his head in what could be a prayer, but lifted it just as quickly. "Can you access it?"

The Captain shrugged. "I'm going to try." She raised a hand to the door panel and planted it atop the scanner. It glowed faintly and warmth flooded her palm, then it cooled it and she frowned when it blinked red. She had been denied. "That's never happened beforeâ€|" she mumbled.

Forerunner Ruins often opened the moment a human so much as looked at them. The fact this one scanned her and then denied her was interesting. "Bring in the doctors." she said, stepping back and allowing room for the pair of lab coat wearing men by. They immediately began to take readings.

And off to the side, hands at his sides stood John-117. The twin orange orbs of his helmets visors stared back at her when she turned to him. Ready for orders. "Chief, stay down here, provide security for our forces and assist as needed." She said, sounding tired. "I'm headed back to _Infinity_."

"Captain," Chief assented with a nod and salute. She returned it and moved back towards one of the few Pelicans on the ground delivering

soldiers and equipment.

Her gone, he turned to the ruins doors and frowned behind his visor. Normally, this would be where Cortana would be making a quip about how something felt wrong about the ruins. He watched one of the scientists place his hand atop the scanner. He, like the Captain, was denied.

That alone made him wonder. The ruins still worked, obviously. Security systems were still active and capable of scanning and identifying. Oddly enough, he also felt a twinge of rebellious thought to give it a try himself, but he hadn't been ordered to do so. Still, something about the ruins made him twitchy. He didn't like it.

"The ruins feel off, do they not?" John almost genuinely jumped when turned his head saw Arno standing beside him. Then Sangheili was oblivious to this as he continued. "I've not seen anything like them. They are ancient but not of Forerunners."

"Bold statement." John replied curtly in his vast array of people skills.

"It makes sense," Arno added with a glance at the Spartan. "Something tells me that the fates have decreed you be in attendance for a reason, Spartan," Arno gestured towards the doors now occupied with scientists. "I know not your face. But I know the body language of a soldier who wishes to do something he thinks he should not." Arno's mandibles twitched into a Sangheili smile. "Test your luck."

The Chief wasn't sure how he felt about a Sangheili using a very human saying. And that said saying often referred to his own "luck" that he'd become fabled for in the UNSC. Where was that luck for Captain or Commander Keyes? Johnson? Halsey, William, Samuel. Every man and woman, human and SPARTAN alike. Where was all that luck when they needed to come back alive?

John gave a short sigh. "I do not see the point in it."

"And yet, you've taken one step closer since I've suggested it." The Sangheili countered with just a hint of smugness to his tone. "Go, the scientists will not mind if the man who gave this site to them wishes to see if he may open it." The Sangheili urged.

John frowned behind his visor, but otherwise proceeded forward. He couldn't deny that Arno was right, he could feel something pulling at him, drawing him in. Like a distant whisper, calling out to him. As he approached the door, one of the Scientists looked up.

"Master Chief, sir?" He adjusted his glasses. "Is there something?"

"I want to try opening the door," John replied with a glance to the man.

"W-With all due respect sir, I think we've got things well in-" The scientist to the right cut in.

"That's The Master Chief, just let him have at it," The other man looked ready to protest, then sighed and simply gestured the chief

forward. The other who cut him off nodded and gave the chief a curt nod. "Don't break it." he chuckled.

"I'll try." John replied curtly and stepped past them up to the door. He looked at it, then at the panel. He raised a hand, and the pull got worse—he needed to know what was behind the door now. He took a breathe and he placed his palm against the panel.

The door reacted. Ancient machinery activated, and the scientists jumped when the door groaned and began to part. Sliding into four individual pieces, each as thick as the Chief's forearm. The metal glinted softly in the new light offered and John flicked his wrist and the Jackal constructed itself in his grip. "Get back!" John ordered the scientists.

They did as told and got out of the ruin while the doors fully opened.

It revealed darkness. But there was a floor to follow. John took step inside and before his flashlights could activate the floor lit up when his foot made contact. Gold and white lights illuminated a room. Perfectly square, walls flat and no indents, but in the center was a pedestal, and at the top six pincers.

And they held an orb, reflected the light around it in a way that it appeared almost a mirage to John's eyes. He lowered his weapon and frowned, glancing back to the scientists. "Clear!" He called back and moved forward into the room. Nothing else—just the orb.

That wasn't suspicious at all.

One of the scientists stepped into the doorway and peered at the orb in question before withdrawing a device from one of his many pockets. Lifting it he moved towards the strange object and soon the device in his hand began to ping. "That's odd." He mumbled.

John didn't like it when Scientists said "Odd", it was normally followed by something bad. "What is?"

"The scanner says whatever we're looking at isn't there." The man lowered the scanner and stepped up to the pedestal. "The edges are blurred—almost like its not even solid." The man raised a hand and then hesitated when his hand neared the object. Eventually he pulled it back to safety and frowned. "We should report this to the captain—we need more equipment." he muttered.

The Chief had to agree there. "Captain," John activated the com to the Captain, who was likely still on a Pelican headed back to the Infinity. "We've gotten into the door, I had clearance and inside was—well." He looked at it. "An orb. The scientists are suggesting we set up camp for further study."

A thoughtful hum. "_You had clearance? Interesting— as for their request, granted. Have them send me a list of what they need_." Another pause. "_Apparently a high level communication is waiting for me back at the Infinity, The Fleet Admiral's probably found out about our little deviation. Get ready to dust off if we're being deployed elsewhere, Master Chief_."

"Ma'am." John nodded and closed the comm. He turned to the scientist.

"Just send her a list of what you need and you'll have it."

* * *

><p>February 8, 2581. Military Calendar.
UNSC Central Command Station **_**Atlas**_**, Sol System. 0700 Hours.

>Leonardo closed his eyes with an explosive sigh as terminal pinged again. Signalling another message directly for him. The Fleet Admiral opened his eyes and stared at the screen with a frown. It had been like this for awhile now, ever since his demotion of Hood to a mere Lieutenant had ruffled more than a few feathers with the senior staff and some of the younger generation who revered Hood as a hero.

They couldn't understand that kind of thinking was flawed. Allowing someone the perks of evasion for the crimes they've committed simply because of past deeds was not a safe practice. It drove them to arrogance and make them think themselves untouchable, above the others beside them. Leonardo could have forgiven Hood had the man destroyed ONI after the warâ€¦ but still such an organization remained under his mentor's watch.

Such a betrayal of humanity could not be allowed and it would not go unpunished. Not while Leonardo breathed would he allow things like this happen without any consequences to the party responsible. It was the relaxed mentality of his predecessors that had lead to this no doubt. Hood and the mentality of his older officers that allowed ONI to exist. Out of sight and out of a mind.

"Majestic," Leonardo mumbled, staring at his console while he read a strongly phrased letter that essentially told the Fleet Admiral to reinstate Hood fully or face consequences. Not so directly you mind, but the message was implied there in the message itself.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral?" Majestic appeared, looking curious.

"Do we surrender to what isâ€¦?" Leonardo muttered. "Or do we change it to better fit into the grander scheme of things?"

"I'm not sure I follow, sir." Majestic canted his head to the side, blinking confusedly. "Is something troubling you?"

Leonardo considered his reply carefully, afterall, as much as a friend he considered Majestic, he was still a UNSC AI and thus was shackled the same way as the others and if Leonardo was to even speak of what he was thinking about it, it could cause the AI to just as easily turn on him, or at the very least, alert someone.

"The older officers here at Fleetcom, Majestic," Leonardo said finally. "They refuse to see what I did was only rightâ€¦ what I had to do, to Hoodâ€¦ The man could not be allowed to go unpunished for his simply letting ONI be all these years." He steepled his fingers before his face. "They threaten resignation, further actions against me and I believe more than a few are trying to discredit me in the eyes of the committee."

Leonardo admitted. "I amâ€¦ at a loss. I cannot change their minds, they don't understandâ€¦ and I cannot let them remain lest they begin doing harm to all I'm attempting to do, for the UNSC and mankind. For

every race across the galaxyâ€| " He bowed his head and grunted. "For our Mantle of Responsibility."

Majestic looked thoughtful and torn for a few moments as the two stayed in a sombre silence while both lost themselves to their own thoughts and processes. After a few minutes of this, Majestic finally spoke. "There areâ€| a few options sir," The AI began slowly. "To my understanding. Rear Admiral Kowalski's commanding record and the Insurrectionist combat tactics of today, he would make a good tactical commander to oversee future operations in the Valkyrie system." A known hotzone for Insurrectionist activity. "Moving him from the Atlas, and with his position vacant, you can fill it with someone who works better with you."

Leonardo stared at the AI, surprised by the rather devious subterfuge it was implying. "You're suggesting I send a high ranking officer to oversee combat operations in a hotzoneâ€| and then replace his vacancy here at Highcom with one of my own supporters?" Leonardoâ€| hadn't considered that, really. Such a tactic seemed underhanded, something Parangosky would pull and he didn't wish to be anything like that wretched woman.

"High Command and Fleetcom are essential structures for the well being of the United Nations Space Command, sir," Majestic replied simply. "They must be a well oiled machine, working like clockworkâ€| if one gear stalls, it stalls the next to it and soon the clockwork is slowed and dragged on." The AI explained while closing his eyes. "I believe you have a good sense of, well, good. But your thinking and methods will attract attention as they progress, this business with Hood for example. I agree no party should be without consequenceâ€|" A thoughtful pause. "That's why I want to help you. Youâ€| mix things up, as it were."

"I thought unknown variables like me were an AI's enemy?" Leonardo quipped with a small amused smile.

"Sir, human history is a series of repeated failures and too few successesâ€|" Majestic frowned as if there was a bad taste in his mouth. "Democracy, Capitalism, Dictatorshipâ€| Every form of Government has risen and fallen through Humanity's history. But not once has it ever seen a time where Humanity was truly at peace."

Leonardo stared at the AI, lips forming into a thoughtful frown. "Noâ€| It has not, we've already fought, always killed for everything and anythingâ€|" He closed his eyes. "From shiny stones, to plastic and paperâ€| Ideology, religion, commerce. They've all gifted and poisoned us, haven't they?" Leonardo scoffed and leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. "In the endâ€| We just accept it, that it's human nature. It's in our blood to want, to be above the one beside us, to have more than everyone else."

Leonardo bit his lip in a sudden anger. "If that's true," He sat up and clenched his fists on the rests of his chair. "How are we worthy to uphold the Mantle? How do we safeguard all life in the Galaxy when we ourselves cannot fight the greatest battle that is our own nature without dragging each other into it?" He said.

Majestic and the fuming Fleet Admiral again sat in silence until finally. "Genetic research, could provide that answer. Sir." The AI

spoke softly, as if whispering a secret.

Leonardo looked up, inhaling and sighing softly before composing himself. "Explain." he ordered simply.

"Human nature is determined by the genetics in which they are made from," The AI began. "It's almost impossible, but With enough research. The Human gene map could be completed, the Forerunner Librarian herself told Sierra One One Seven that she had manipulated our genes, hiding songs within them." Majestic explained. "If we can trace her research, expand it. It's possible we can discover a way to ensure certain personality traits are enhanced, preserved for future generations."

"Future generations," Leonardo closed his eyes. "So, it would be decades, maybe even centuries before the fruit of such labours is fully realized?"

"At the least, yes," Majestic solemnly nodded. "But such a plan It would be considered-

"Inhuman?" Leonardo grunted. "Wrong both ethically and morally? Of course it would be," The Fleet Admiral replied, leaning back again in his seat and turning in the chair to observe the vastness of space outside the station and the blue and green jewel that was Earth below. "If it were to come to light, I'd be regarded like ONI, a madman trying to play God and change the very being of humanity itself. Change our soul."

Majestic appeared beside him, standing and observing the planet below as well. "You would be, yes."

"But is such a thing worth the risk? It's found out, I am killed, the UNSC is discredited and in all likelihood disbanded as people will think I had the approval of the entire military as I am its leader." Leonardo didn't look away from the planet. "But if it succeeds, Humanity would finally be worth of accepting the Mantle. Of taking each and every hand in this beautiful universe and holding onto with a smile and a promise of safety."

"Kinder words have been spoken by more malicious persons." Majestic countered easily. "I know you, sir. Even now, you're struggling to even come to grasp with the ideas swirling in your head. Your conscious is telling you how wrong it is to even consider it, even as your tactical mindset is telling you all the possible routes this could end with. Success or Failure will be absolute."

"I succeed and be long dead before I see the world I've possibly created, good or bad" Leonardo chuckled lowly. "Or I fail and am killed for being another name in a long list of fools who tried to change Humanity with unsuitable methods."

"Yes." Majestic nodded.

Leonardo stood in silence with his eyes focused on Earth below before they drifted upwards to the distant stars and infinite blackness of space. In the end what was worth more in the grand scheme of this unknowing, unfeeling universe? That he continue to do his best with his life and simply let Humanity come to its own ends or change it and hope to leave behind a species that didn't

care for superiority. A Humanity that stood side by side with everyone else and worked to a mutual goal of coexisting in peace.

The Fleet Admiral felt this was naivety thinking, that such a thing would never succeed.

"Majesticâ€|?"

"Yes, Admiral?" The AI turned his head to the man.

But stillâ€|

"Bring up everything you can about the Librarian, and any connected research materials, personnel logs, anything of hers. I want it." The Fleet Admiral turned and marched back to his desk, sitting down and swivelling back to his console. "And send me the data files on every Halsey clone currently in our employ. Along with a list of geneticists."

"At once sir," Majestic flickered from view.

"I want people who don't care for the morals of this project," Leonardo stated flatly. "I want people who see the big picture. That understand the galaxy needs a Humanity it can depend on sooner rather later. Tell themâ€| it's to serve The Mantle." That should reduce the questions.

"I'll do my best."

"No," Leonardo closed his eyes. "We'll do our best. I need a partnerâ€|" He glanced at the AI's pedestal as it flickered on, revealing the AI's avatar. "And I can't trust Hood, or any human. They'd never understand. Not fully." He couldn't trust Hood, Katherine, none of them could be trusted with this.

It was him and Majestic.

The Fleet Admiral gave a bitter scoff. "And Hood said I couldn't make the hard choicesâ€|"

Even if Leonardo now felt like dirt and that he needed a few stiff drinks. He would see this through, his life would mean something. Be it good or bad. And soon he'd not be able to turn back anyway.

All for the Mantle of Responsibility.

* * *

><p>Omega Nebula, Omega Station.
Afterlife, Aria's private booth. Kai Leng. 10:00 Cycles.

>Aria's fingers gently tapped the back of the cushions of the large lounging couch in what could only be called seething silence. Miranda was no better, arms crossed over her bust and scowled etched firmly on her lips. Eyes glaring heatedly back at Aria, who glared right back.

Leng himself was off to the side with his arms crossed, leaning against the booth's windows without much of a care as the two women did their pissing contest. As had been the norm since Miranda had

immediately called for sources to try and launch a rescue operation for their kidnapped Operative Taylor.

Aria had urged her to remain calm and remember who was in charge. Now Miranda was glaring. "Enough!" Leng said to draw their attention. "This solves nothing." He stood and brushed his shoulder off. "Taylor's information mustn't fall into Council hands, lest it run the risk of falling into the UNSC's and they learn what we're up to out here." He frowned. "And they won't have a single regret of coming in here and levelling this place."

Miranda nodded. "Which is why we should rescue him, a few of our contacts inside Council space could intercept him on the Citadel, fast and dirty."

Aria grunted. "We can't run the risk of more of our resources being lost for a single person who's only middle class important to our efforts here in the Terminus." The Asari frowned. "We're eliminating him. Dead men tell no tales and we risk only one assassin for our own."

"Aria is correct," Leng agreed from his place. When Miranda turned to him to say something he raised a hand and silenced her protest. "The loss is regrettable, but it cannot be helped. It's the most efficient way to ensure secrecy that this doesn't get back to the UNSC." He lowered his hand.

Aria waved a hand and Dax stepped forward. "Dax, get in contact with some of our boys on the Citadel, tell them whoever puts our captured human down gets the creds." She said as if ordering a pizza.

"Of course, Aria." The Turian replied, lifting his Omni-Tool.

Miranda glared at them before giving a short huff and sighing, massaging her temples. "Guess that's done."

"It is," Aria said with finality. "You should return to your duties, Lawson." With that, the Asari stood and stretched her arms above her head and gave a short groan of pleasure when her shoulder popped. "I am going to get a rest in." She lowered her arms and looked at Dax. "Make sure to keep me up to date on any changes."

"I will, Aria." The Turian bowed his head.

Aria turned and marched down the steps onto the floor, then to the side passages. Behind her, Leng followed, quiet as ever. She frowned and glanced back at his stoic face, eyes hidden behind that black visor. Finally, she spoke. "You don't care for Taylor, do you?"

"He's never really been committed to the same cause as me and Miranda." Leng replied simply, shrugging his shoulders. "He was a good soldier, but hardly worth the trouble of a retrieval mission."

Aria nodded. "So, you do have emotion, then? It seems like you have is arrogance and anger."

"Trying to see what motivates me, Aria?" Leng replied with only a

tinge of suspicion. "Don't bother. Why I do what I do goes with me to my grave. None shall know what drives me." He glanced ahead. "And I prefer it that way."

"Must be lonely," Aria smirked. "Never letting anyone in. You seem too callous to even bed for the fun of it."

The Human assassin grunted. "I don't care for sex, alcohol, friendship, attachmentsâ€¦ All of that is just one weakness that can lead to a dozen more. A moment of weakness is a moment you can die and it would be without dignity because you weren't aware to stop it." He explained to her. "That's why you're still alive, because I never let my guard down."

Aria arched a brow. "You don't sleep?"

"I do, but you'll never know when." Leng's tone was only a bit less serious.

"Disconcerting." Aria said dryly. "But a fair point, you're a very effective counter-assassin." She gave an amused chuckle while shaking her head. "I take it you've done this sort of work before then?" She asked him.

Leng meanwhile was beginning to frown at the personnel questions she was asking him. Oh he was very aware of her intents to try and seduce him and he took great amusement in the fact she hadn't yet learned that the desires of the flesh held no place in his heart. Where duty and violence reigned, her efforts would always be for naught. He just never bothered to tell her because her weekly attempts, seeing that building frustrations behind those normally controlled eyes of hers build up was far more rewarding than any form of physical stimulation could bring the man. In such a way he held more power than her as her guards saw him asâ€¦ less than normal due to his extremes in constant alertness and sharp talents.

They arrived at her chambers and the doors parted for her. She stepped inside and paused when sitting on the edge of her bed was none other than Morinth, the new recruit for her security forces, who smiled flirtatiously at the woman while wearing nothing but a simple fabric dress with various belts and buckles along the arm and waist and left leg. It showed so much yet so little. A combination Leng had long since associated with Asari Maiden outfits.

Aria's eyes bore back at Morinth's own before her lips turned into a smirk. "Now what is it you want?" She asked.

Morinth leaned back on the bed, her hands supporting her as she stared back at Aria, glancing at Leng only briefly before saying. "Privacy, for one." She said with a low voice filled with forbidden promises.

Aria and her fellow Asari squared off for a few moments before she glanced at Leng and nodded. "Leave us." She commanded softly, tone made of silk.

Leng's was flat and uninterested. "Very well." He said with a bow of his head. A final glance between the two before he turned and left through the door. A moment later it closed and left the two Asari alone.

"And you, for two." Morinth finished her little list of things she wanted as she stood and sauntered over to the leader of Omega and all its pirates who had reached up, unhooked the belt of her white jacket and let the ends hang. Morinth's lips curved attractively before she reached up and parted the jacket itself, letting it slide down the length of Aria's arms to pool at her feet.

"Well," Aria whispered while raising a hand to toy with one of the buckles that held Morinth's top together. "Here I am." She leaned over, planting her lips with a frustrated passion against the other Asari's own, who pressed into her with a more hungry dominance. A fury of hurricanes as the pair fought for dominance through the kiss.

And at the corner of the room under stealth of his cloak Leng watched as the two unhinged belts and buckles, shed fabric and inhibitions before then tangled their limbs atop the pirate queen's bed. And through the whole ordeal his steely eyes tracked Morinth, searching forâ€| something, anything that could explain why his senses told him she was a threat at all times.

And while both Asari lost themselves in their pleasure, Morinth had to strain control to simply overwhelm the other Asari above her, to grant her the sweetest pleasure in the galaxy because she could feel she was being watched. And if it was Aria's pet human, she couldn't risk killing Aria and surviving the ensuing battle with her guard dog.

It wouldn't be as satisfying for her, but she would finish Aria without killing her today. She'd eliminate her dog later and then she'd get her true pleasure.

Leng had again saved his charge's life. By watching two beautiful alien women having sex.

Somehow, he felt this was more than a few people's fetish.

* * *

><p>Solric System, Batarian space.
BCS ****_**Balrog**_****,
Bridge CIC. 10:00 Cycles.

>"I'm telling you it wasn't there before." The Scanners officer aboard the Balrog muttered to his colleague beside him while they scrutinized the scanner screen. "One moment it was there, the next it was gone again. Hasn't popped up since!"

"Could just be a system's glitch," His fellow said with a frown. "Hardly seems like anything to bug the Captain over while he sleeps."

"And if it's something important?" The Scanner Officer asked.

His colleague bit his lip and his various eyes blinked in thoughtful silence. A moment, twoâ€| "Fine. We'll be crossing the system and going way off our patrol route, but what the hellâ€| Might be something." He stepped back and brought up his Omni-Tool. "Captain Hatis?"

A bout of grumbling. "_This better be good, Urks_." The Captain of

the Balrog grumbled through the com channel.

"Sir, we've detected something at the other edge of the system and we're requesting permission to give a quick investigation."

"_Fine, fine. Do what you want, just make sure to log it in the damned Captain's log for me_, " The Captain growled. "_I don't need command riding my ass over "lack of vigilance" or some other shit_."

The Officer rolled his eyes. All of them. "Of course sir," he closed the com and sat down on the Captain's "throne", "Set a course, helm. Let's see what's out there."

The ship jumped to FTL. Soon enoughâ€¦ they left it and immediately were greeted to the sight of a large blackened hull of a massive ship just floating through space. "Hells!" Urks cursed. "Helm, evade!"

"Already on it!" The Batarian at the controls replied as the Frigate began to turn as best as it could, proximity warnings blared across the bridge as they closed on the large hullâ€¦ then slowly skimmed over it, the ship shuddering as their smaller vessel's slanted belly scrapped briefly along it before lifting up.

Threat cleared. The ship turned and tried to get a better look at what almost hit them.

What they saw was a massive, black ship. It's edges were sharp, very Human in design. It was massiveâ€¦ incredibly so. There was no lightsâ€¦ it's engine appeared long cold and there was some very weathered writing on the side of the hull. But above all it was again massive.

"How big is this thing?" Urks whispered.

The door to the bridge opened and Captain stormed onto the deck. "The hells was tha-â€¦" he stopped short and stared out at the view before them. The behemoth of a ship. "â€¦How big is that thing?"

"Scansâ€¦are showingâ€¦" The Scanner's office stared. "It's not there." he whispered.

"The hells do you mean?" The Captain snarled suddenly. "That sure isn't a damned mirage. Of course it's there!"

"I _know_ it's there, but the scanners are saying _nothing_ is out there but dust and rock debris!" The Scanner's officer replied back with a bit of bite.

"Targeting systems say the same thing," The Weapon's officer replied. "Laser guidance shows infinite distance. Whatever sort of stealth plating its using is fooling everything we have."

"If it's invisible to our sensors, how did we pick it up in the first place?" The Captain asked then.

Everyone looked baffled, before the Scanner's officer frowned. "The debris, signs of an older satellite, maybe it impacted the hull and

it's core detonated with enough heat to cause the scanner to pick it up as an engine burst?"

"Who cares?" Urks said from his place beside the Captain.
"Communications, launch a beacon and get me Central Command, they need to know about this."

"Hey, who the hell is Captain of this ship, huh?" Hatis growled. "And get off my chair!"

"Sorry sir, Your negligence and un-Captain like behaviour of late gives me reason to relieve you and your command, as second in command of the Balrog, that now falls to me." Urks growled back.

"You just want the damned glory!"

"And you don't? Unlike you, Hatis, I'm going to share!" He turned to the guards beside the door. "Arrest the relieved Captain and take him to the brig!"

Hatis sputtered, then reached for his Ripper at his belt. The Scanner officer saw and drew his own side arm. He fired, scoring the Captain in the shoulder, who grunted and fell to the side clutching the wound.

The guards having made their decision, rushed over and quickly apprehended Hatis, dragging his cursing and vengeful self from the bridge of the ship, Situation stable, Urks turned to the officer, nodding in thanks. "Thank you, Bruz."

"Anytime," Bruz replied with a nod. "Captain."

Line of succession followed. Urks stared at the behemoth again. Who would build it? What was its hull made of? Why hadn't they found it before? So many questions swam through his mind.

* * *

><p>End of chapter Twenty-Six!

I know, I **_knooooow**_**. Where have I been? What have I been doing? Who ate all the pop tarts in the fridge? Well, I'll answer those questions! I wasâ€| playing a lot of videogames and getting out of a bit a funk concerning my writing. Likeâ€| you ever want to write something, but then you sit your butt down and then suddenly your fingers and muse are all "Naah, we're in the union. We don't do anything"? Well, that's been me so far.**

On brighter news, I've already got a firm idea for how the next Infinitum is going to go, where I want it to go and how it will lead, hopefully, into the third and final story. But, enough possible spoilers there. This here chapter is a bit of a "warm up" for me to get back into the saddle, wanted to catch us up with current events that weren't Garrus' team, who have kinda dominated the show for awhile.

**Hope it was worth the wait. Not likely, but yeah. Hope you enjoyed and thank you everyone for your continued reading and support. Sorry for the wait again. Also, you can see things being set in motion, oh yes.

>

PS. I ate the pop tarts.

End
file.